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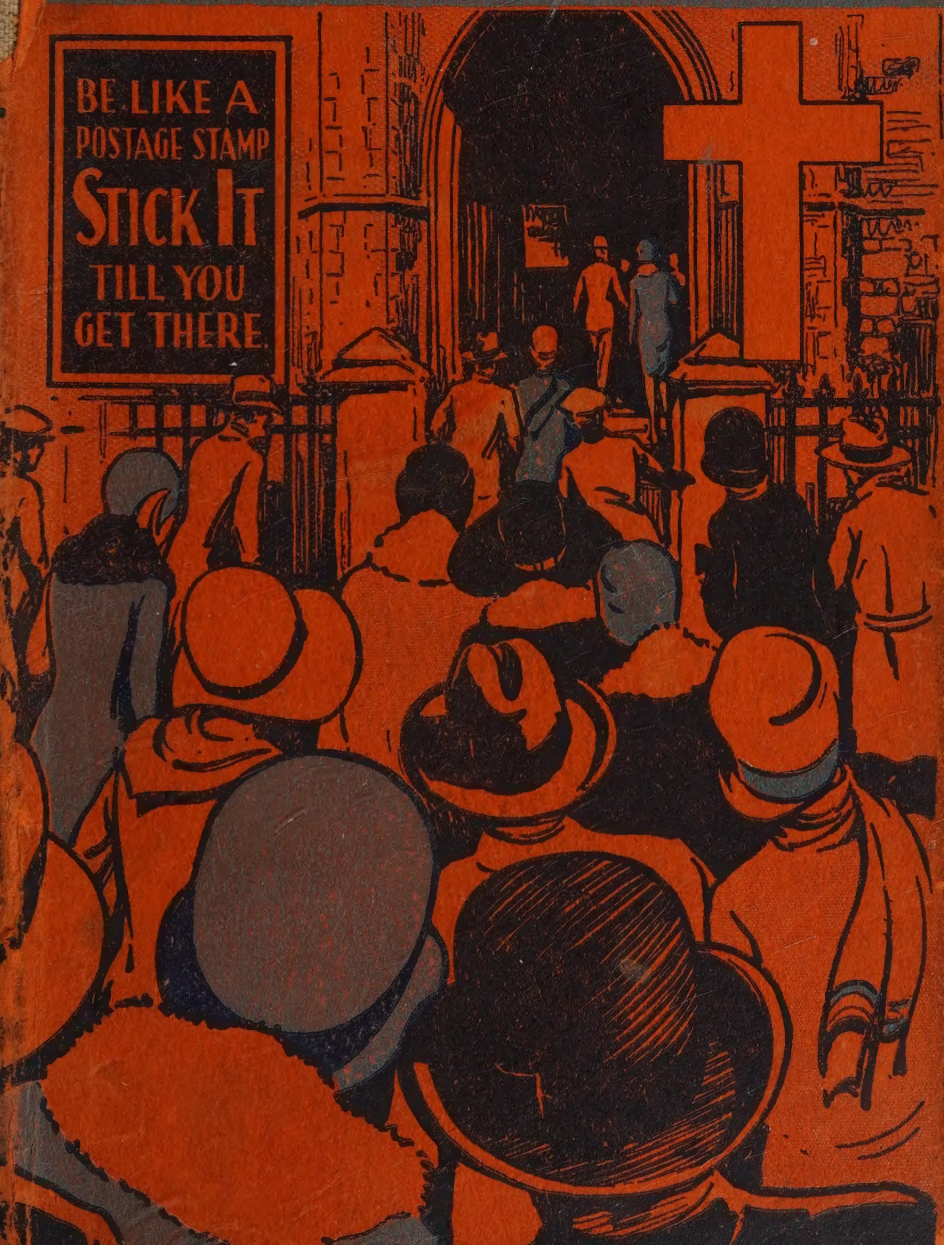

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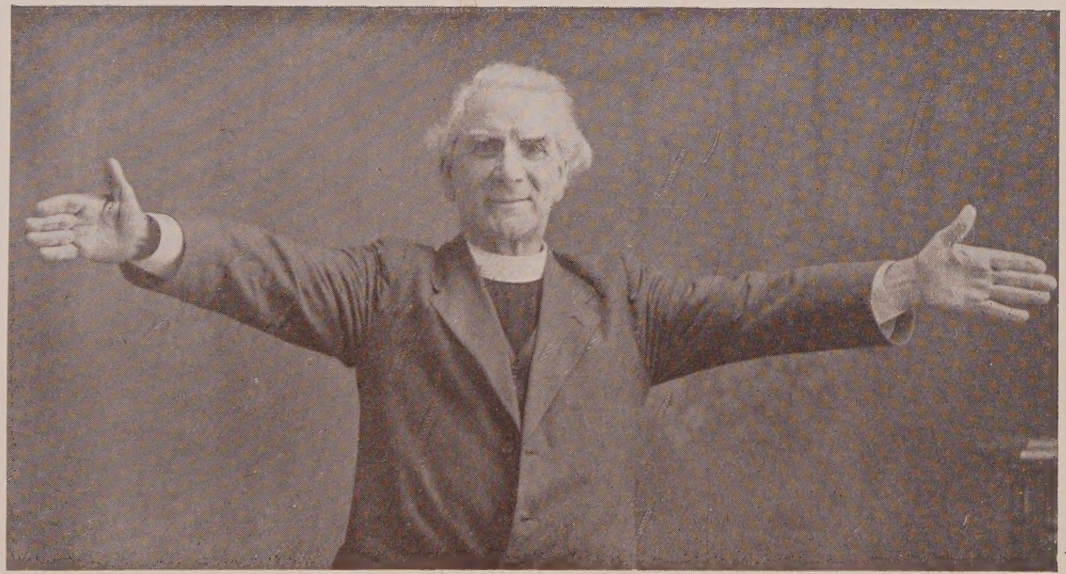

Photo : Whiffin, Poplar.

LAX IN ACTION.

LET'S GO TO POPLAR!

By
WILLIAM H. LAX
Author of '*Lax of Poplar*'

WITH PEN AND INK SKETCHES BY
ALFRED E. BESTALL

LONDON
THE EPWORTH PRESS
J. ALFRED SHARP

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First Edition, July 1929

FOREWORD

By C. Ensor Walters, General Secretary of the London Wesleyan Methodist Mission

The amazing success of *Lax of Poplar* caused me no surprise ; when I read that remarkable volume in manuscript, I knew at once that here was a living and vital book. Here was Lax himself, with his pathos and humour, his high courage and his lovable humanity. Here, I thought, is the one book Lax will write and win a success never to be repeated. But Lax is a man of remarkable gifts. He has ' done it again,' and here, warm from Lax's great heart, and instinct with Lax's genius, is a marvellous word-picture of Poplar and its people. *Lax of Poplar* was in a very real sense a great book ; *Let's Go to Poplar* is a greater.

On reflection, I am not surprised at Lax's power as a writer. I know him so well. We were colleagues at the commencement of our ministry in the West London Mission and served under the greatest of Methodist chiefs, Hugh Price Hughes. Well I recall the day when at St. Pancras Station I met Lax—I believe it was his first visit to London—and guided him to his ' diggings ' ; I knew at once that here was no ordinary man, here was a man gifted with the quality we call genius, and of the stuff of which great men are made. Little Lax is in truth a great man ; great in heart, in vision, and in power ; great in speech and great with the pen ; a wonderful gift of God to London, to Poplar, and to the Methodist Church.

Attempt to grasp the wonder of Lax's life work. Twenty-seven years ago he was appointed to our Church at Poplar, and had to face a depressing building, a depleted congregation, and all the problems of a vast East End area. Look at him

to-day—as fresh and vigorous as ever. Never blasé, cynical, or bored, he is fresh with the dews of the morning ; his face set to the sun ; his outlook buoyant with hope. When he visits my office at Westminster he brings with him a breeze from the Hills of God. Cobwebs, depression, and pessimism depart and the sun shines !

Gladly will we go with Lax to Poplar ! As one reads the pages of this volume, Poplar in its glory and shame, its beauty and ugliness, its hope and despair, lives ; and so do the people who are depicted in such graphic a manner. Has any modern writer so truly pictured the present-day cockney, the most lovable person in the world ? To go to Poplar with Lax is to believe afresh in God and humanity.

What is the secret of this man ? He has gifts many and varied, but these are not enough to explain him ; these will not keep a man young and hopeful for twenty-seven years in the East End of London. No ! Above all, Lax is a man of God with an amazing belief in prayer, a passionate belief in Christ, and a mighty faith. You cannot shake the conviction he possesses that in the gospel of Christ is the world's one hope. I remember that great man to whom Lax and I owe so much, Hugh Price Hughes, saying to me one day as we crossed Piccadilly Circus, ' Walters, one day men will see in Piccadilly Circus the City of God.' Lax has a faith like that, and already he sees the City of God in Poplar.

And, added to all else, there is a wonderful human factor in Lax's life—the influence of his sweet and gracious wife. I never think of Lax without also remembering the noble woman who shares his sorrows, his toils and his triumphs, and his love for God and Poplar. Yes ! we will go to Poplar and rejoice that God sent Lax and his wife there that they might help in the building of the City of God.

C. Ensor Walters.

TO THE READER

'DO it again! Do it again!' as the children say when they see the conjuror produce a rabbit from a silk hat. So said my friends and the wider public concerning my former volume, *Lax of Poplar*; and that kind and generous demand is responsible for this, my second adventure in the perilous ways of authorship.

And I am bound to say that I took up the task gladly. I have always been a student of human nature. The humblest individual I have ever met has taught me something. The mask of the human face may be either a revealer or a concealer of the personality within. To study that personality, to fathom the deeps of motive and intent, to understand the drift and current of the individual's thought, has been my consuming passion.

The people portrayed in these pages are presented as types of character. They are studies in the perplexing by-ways of human life. Some are normal, ordinary men and women, whilst others are abnormal and strange, with many a delusion and kink. As human documents they have been a never-failing source of interest to me, and I have never tired in studying them.

But such as they are, I present them as true

stories. I repeat, they are true stories. I say this, because of the scepticism of a friend who, with a twinkle in her eye, suggested that the narrative of 'The Lion Tamer' might prove a sad blow to the authenticity of the volume.

My career has been interesting in at least this one respect, that I have been brought into contact with all sorts and conditions of men and women. I have been privileged to share the secrets of many. My humble hope is that I have been able to ease a few burdens, and to cheer some fainting hearts.

I need not say that I make no claim to literary artistry. I have tried to set down incidents and narratives which are the gleanings from a wide field of experience, in one of the most fascinating spheres that any man could desire. These records are what Fate or Providence has brought within my ken. They, it ought to be said, are only the forward line in the great adventurous game of the past thirty years. There are others whose part and place in the game cannot well be told.

Once again, I gratefully acknowledge the help of my friends the Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Sharp, the Rev. C. Ensor Walters, the Rev. R. Moffat Gautrey, the Rev. and Mrs. Henry High, and the Rev. W. E. Clapham.

WILLIAM H. LAX.

June 1929.

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It's the human touch in this world that counts,
The touch of your hand and mine ;
That means far more to the fainting heart
Than shelter, or bread, or wine.
For shelter is gone when the night is o'er,
And bread lasts only a day ;
But the touch of the hand and the sound of the voice,
Live in the soul alway.

I

A THRILLING CHRISTMAS EVE

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.

—TENNYSON.

Chapter I

A THRILLING CHRISTMAS EVE

I WAS no stranger to adventures before I came to Poplar. Even in my callow youth it would appear as though Providence was preparing me for the strange ways of life, and for those experiences which were to make such a vivid and lasting impression upon my own memory, as well as upon the lives of others.

The events which I am about to record go back to the period of my training as a theological student at Didsbury College. The persons most closely involved have since passed into the beyond. I am, therefore, at liberty to tell the story of my most thrilling Christmas Eve.

In the year of which I write my first College term was coming to a close. Christmas was drawing near. Perhaps in view of the low state of my finances, and also because of an aversion to having three or four idle Sundays, I told the Principal that I should be glad to ' supply ' any pulpit that might be in need of a preacher during the vacation. He promised that should any applications for the service of students come in, he would let me know.

Accordingly, about a week before the term came to an end, he offered me preaching appointments for the four Sundays covered by the holidays. One was in Cheshire and three in Lancashire. I readily accepted them, and in due course my name was sent on to the various churches as the student who would conduct the services on the given Sunday. It was on the first Sunday of the four that my adventures happened.

Christmas Day that year fell on a Sunday. My instructions were that I was to preach at the morning and evening services, and conduct a special Christmas service for young people in the afternoon. I was also informed that I should be entertained at the Manor House, and that my hostess, Miss N——, would be pleased to know the time of my arrival. A note enclosed from her in the Society steward's letter told me that a pony-trap would be at the railway station to meet me, and that, as it was a considerable distance from the railway to the village of G——, it would be advisable to come warmly clad.

I commenced the journey to my appointment on the Saturday afternoon. In the train I took the letter from my pocket, and for the sixth or seventh time read its contents, so as to be familiar with every detail of its instruction. I concluded that the worthy steward must be a man of intelligence and business training, for his correspondence was

clear and precise. As to Miss N——, I was somewhat puzzled. I visualized her as a frugal, punctilious lady. (Had she not enclosed a note in the steward's letter? And had she not advised me to travel warmly clad?) Then I speculated. Was she young, middle-aged, or old? Did she live alone? Had she brothers? Would there be other guests besides myself? Was I in for a rollicking Christmas? Or, would it be a quiet, sedate festival? The train sped on, and I mused and wondered.

At last I arrived at the station indicated in the letter. It was, of course, small and mean. Darkness had set in. The only illumination was from two oil-lamps. Happily there was an early moon, which lit up the details of the dull and desolate place. With my travelling-rug and bag I alighted from the train, to hear the porter loudly calling the station's name. He might well have spared himself such excess of zeal and energy, for I was the only passenger to step on to the diminutive platform. In a minute or two the train had departed, and I stood watching the red tail-lights disappear in the distance. After attending to several small articles of baggage, the porter came and collected my ticket. He was an elderly man, friendly and voluble, and seemed glad to have some one to talk to. Was I the new curate? He had heard that a young man—and a little man—

was coming. (This he said after focusing his lamp upon me !) The last curate was old and cranky ! It was time he snuffed himself out ! He ought to have been pole-axed ! The miserable old sinner ! &c., &c. Evidently the station official was no friend of the former curate.

When an opening occurred I told him that I was going to such-and-such a village to preach at the Wesleyan Church on the following day. How far was it ? Did he know Miss N—— ? Had he ever seen the Manor House ? Was a pony-trap waiting for me ? To which questionnaire there followed a veritable spate of answers—explanatory, historical, biographical.

The village was six or eight miles away. The pony-trap had not arrived. I might make myself comfortable for some time yet, for ' Old George,' Miss N——'s handy-man, didn't know what the word ' punctual ' meant ! He was always late. Yes, he knew Miss N——. She was well-off, ' getting on in years,' and had ' a way of her own.' He didn't think that he would care to spend Christmas at the Manor House with Miss N——! And he shouldn't think I need expect a very hectic time ! And so on.

After a while the porter bustled off, leaving me to my reflections. It was bitterly cold. Hard, dry, frosty weather had set in. The hoar-frost covered the trees, vividly fixing every branch in

clear outline. The moon gradually increased in brightness. From the little platform one could see the lonely road, with its silent sentinels of trees stretching far into the distance. To keep myself warm I strode up and down, fervently wishing that ' Old George ' would come with the pony-trap.

In about half an hour the far-off hoof-beats and the rumble of the wheels on the hard road told me that my deliverance was at hand. So it proved, for soon the lights of the vehicle came into sight, and the steaming pony trotted into the station yard.

' Is your name Lax ? ' shouted the driver, who was none other than ' Old George.'

' Yes,' I replied. ' I suppose you are from Miss N——, of the Manor House ? '

A grunt was all the reply he vouchsafed. Pointing to the seat at his side, he indicated that I was to climb into the trap, after depositing my bag behind. This I did, and so commenced the last stage of my long journey.

' Old George ' was as taciturn as the railway porter was voluble. To my tactful inquiries his replies took the form of murmurs, nods, or shakes of the head. At the best his answers were mono-syllabic. So I settled down to silence. The pony bravely rattled along. The keen air cut like a knife, and the frost coated my eyebrows and hair.

By and by we swung through a gate, and then the pony walked up a carriage drive. The Manor House stood well back from the road. It was an old Tudor house, with many gables and a large porch surmounting a handsome oak door. My companion slowly and laboriously dismounted, sought for my bag, and led the way to the house. Vigorously pulling a big handle, he let loose a loud clanging of bells which echoed through the place. The sound was what I should expect to hear from the bells of a monastery or nunnery. It was strident, mournful, remote.

The drawing of a heavy bolt indicated that someone was at hand, and the door was opened wide. My bag was handed in, and ' Old George ' informed the woman who stood before me, Rebecca by name, that I was the preacher. I thanked my charioteer, and in as cheerful a voice as I could muster wished him ' A Merry Christmas ! ' Whether he heard or not I cannot say, but he walked away without a word.

At a glance I took in the situation. Rebecca, the maid, was getting towards the sixties. I cannot call her old, yet her portly figure and ponderous movements suggested age. I should imagine that she had been in the house for years and had become part of the establishment.

The hall was large and barely furnished. It was lit by a solitary lamp standing on a table. A

grandfather-clock loudly ticked out the seconds, and as I was taking off my overcoat it struck the hour of seven.

I repeated my salutation to Rebecca, and wished her ' A Merry Christmas ! ' To which she replied hoarsely, but demurely, with a smile, and reciprocated my goodwill.

By this time she was showing me into the drawing-room. A genial fire cheered me. I was glad of it, for I was chilled to the bone. The maid stirred up the glowing coals, and then withdrew. I looked around. It was a big room. The furniture was heavy and handsome. One lamp shed a dim radiance from a stand in the centre.

A rustle of garments heralded the coming of my hostess, and I turned towards the door. Advancing quickly, with a smile and with outstretched hands, she greeted me.

' Welcome to the Manor House, Mr. Lax, and a Happy Christmas to you ! '

I thanked Miss N—— as warmly as I could. Her greeting was so spontaneous and entirely free from self-consciousness, I felt at home at once. At the same time, looking into her dark eyes, I wondered what that strange glint or sparkle could mean. She was over fifty years of age, tall and stately, vigorous, indeed almost athletic in figure and movement. She was clearly accustomed to giving orders. She was the mistress of the Manor

House. She invited me to be seated, and for a few minutes we talked about the usual things.

A gong indicated that supper was ready, and my hostess led the way to the dining-room. Rebecca waited at table. Miss N—— and I sat through a plain meal. She was excited. Her conversation was interesting and unflagging. She was full of reminiscence and story. Obviously she was a clever, powerful woman. For more than an hour we talked. One thing I could not but notice was the fixed gaze, almost a stare, that she occasionally turned upon me. I began to feel uncomfortable beneath the penetrating scrutiny, and suppose I must have betrayed my feelings, for she apologized, and explained that I so much reminded her of some one she knew years before.

We returned to the drawing-room, and after some time I suggested that I should like to retire. She brought the Bible, and, calling Rebecca, we three joined in family prayer.

Miss N—— took me to my room, and, hoping that I should be comfortable, wished me good night. As I closed the door I caught that challenging stare again, and wondered what it might mean.

The bedroom was large. The bed stood in a corner, leaving the rest of the apartment empty. It inevitably suggested a postage-stamp in the corner of an envelope ! A candle flickered on a

table by the bedside, throwing deep shadows across the room. Family portraits hung upon the walls. A window, apparently overlooking a garden behind the house, was the only break, apart from the door, in the monotony of the four walls. It was cold. No comforting fire greeted the eye, for there was not even a fire-grate in the room.

I quickly undressed. Then, raising the blind, I looked through the window upon the moonlit garden. Was that something moving among the trees? Perhaps it was a shadow. As I looked more curiously, I thought it was a person. Perhaps it was the gardener.

I got into bed. O for the kindly indulgence of a hot-water bottle! This was clearly a Spartan household. There I lay, waiting for warmth. I looked around the room. Austere faces stood in rigid lines, gazing upon me. Darkness and light alternated as the clouds raced past the moon. Soon I put out the candle, and fell asleep.

After a time I awoke. It was still dark, and I wondered what time it was. Just then the clock in the hall struck one.

'Ah!' thought I, 'this is Christmas Day.'

I lay on my back, half asleep and half awake. I was in the blissful state in which nothing is real. I remember recognizing the darkness succeeding the light as the clouds slipped in front of the

moon. Dreamily, subconsciously, I murmured, ' Christians awake ! '

Gradually I became dimly aware of a presence in the room. I was not certain, but somehow a faint light broke upon the darkness. Looking towards the door, I saw it was still closed. Calling myself a fool for my fears, I told myself to go to sleep. I closed my eyes. But no, my nerves were wide awake, and my eyes again opened. Fixing my attention upon the far end of the room, I discerned once more a faint light out of the darkness, and lo, a figure in white walked through the wall ! As though uncertain of its whereabouts, it groped its way about with hands outstretched. It appeared to be in search of something. It moved to and fro, and then it stopped.

' A ghost ! ' thought I. ' A ghost ! ' And terror seized hold of me. I trembled violently. My blood seemed to congeal in my veins. I tried to cry out, but not a sound could I make. I was petrified with fright.

After a few seconds the thing turned and went back. What a relief ! Whatever could it be ? Was I dreaming ? I pinched myself.

Soon the light slowly returned, and with it came the figure in white. Again it paraded round the room, waving its hands as though uncertain of its position. Held as in a vice, I watched it. I could discern no head or face. It was simply a

blur of light in flowing garments. At last it came to the foot of the bed. Gripping the wooden rail, it held on. I felt a subtle tremulousness proceeding from the figure. Dumb with fear, I lay still. Then the figure moved down the side of the bed, guiding itself by touching the counterpane with its hands. It stood by my side, stooped down to my face, and, through half-open eyes, I saw that it was Miss N——.

As she bent down, I felt her breath on my forehead. I heard the palpitating beat of her heart, so near was she. Her face wore a look of concentrated malevolence. It was drawn and tense. Her lips were closed tight, and her eyes carried that strange glint or stare.

'A Merry Christmas!' she whispered, with a hiss. 'Yes, you shall have a merry Christmas!' And she raised and lowered her face, livid with rage, as though she would destroy me, body and soul.

After what seemed an interminable time, she walked away. What should I do? I would rouse the house! I would get up and leave the place!

Whilst I was making my resolves, for the third time that strange light entered the room. Again it came through the wall, and with it that tall, stately figure in white. Again I was turned to stone, or, rather, hypnotized, as I understand a rabbit is when attacked by a stoat.

This time she came straight to my bedside,

She carried something in her hands. Stooping low, she murmured some gibberish that I could not understand. I watched her holding some soft material which she gathered in her hand. From it there came a faint, sickly odour. Gently she held it to my face. As I inhaled, I detected a sweet, penetrating, pungent smell. Like a flash it dawned upon me.

'Chloroform !' I thought, with alarm. I held my breath ; perspiration stood on my forehead. I would not breathe inwards. I was nearly bursting. What should I do ? I knew ; I would leap out of bed. Evidently murder was her object.

'Miss N——!' I cried. 'What *are* you doing ?' With that I sat up and seized her by the shoulders. Giving one long shriek, she gripped me by the throat. Struggling with all my might, I rolled out of bed. She followed me to the floor, scratching and clawing my face with her fingers.

'Rebecca !' I called out. 'Rebecca !' I repeated. Just then the hall clock struck two. Was it only an hour since I heard it strike before ? It seemed an age !

Taking the counterpane, I flung it round her arms, holding her at a distance the while. Suddenly she collapsed, and fell in a faint at my feet.

At that moment Rebecca came into the room. I lit the candle.

'Dear! dear!' she exclaimed. 'She's had another fit! I thought she was queer!' She looked at my face—streaming with blood. 'Dear! dear!' she repeated.

I told her she had better take her mistress to another room and attend to her.

I must have looked a strange object. Hair dishevelled, hands and face torn with the vigorous clawing she had given me.

Gathering up my clothes, I found my way down to the kitchen. There I dressed, washed, and attended to my wounds. A small fire still lingered in the grate, and by its side I determined to remain till daybreak.

After some time Rebecca reappeared. She made a welcome cup of tea, and under its cheering influence we fell a-talking. She told me strange things from the life of Miss N——.

It was obvious that I could not preach that day. My bruised face would require explanation. It was equally clear that I could not, or did not wish to, stay at the Manor House one minute longer than was necessary.

After breakfast 'Old George' drove me back to the station. Muffled up to the eyes, I must have looked strange beyond words. The old man asked no questions, and I ventured no reasons for my hasty return.

Some time afterwards I heard what seemed to be

a probable explanation of the strange behaviour of my hostess. Years before, she had been engaged to be married. The engagement was broken off. She nursed a grievance, and at times suffered from mental disturbance. That apparently accounted for her persistent stare when I first entered the house, and her remark that I reminded her of some one she knew years before. It turned her poor brain.

I found out also that a secret door in my room was the way by which she entered, and which made it appear to me as though she came through the wall.

After some years Miss N—— passed away. I never saw her again after my thrilling adventure. In her will she left a sum of money for the Poplar Mission. She also wrote me a personal private letter, which was sent to me on the day of her funeral by her solicitor, which letter I keep to this day.

It seems a far cry from that village in Cheshire, thirty years ago, to the Poplar of to-day. But Miss N—— proved to be one of our best friends, and for years stood by the Mission.

'God moves in a mysterious way.'

II
LET'S GO TO POPLAR!

It matters little where I was born,
Or whether my parents were rich or poor ;
Whether they shrank from the cold world's scorn,
Or walked in the pride of wealth secure ;
But whether I live an honest man,
And hold integrity firm in my clutch ;
I tell you, brothers, as well as I can,
It matters much.

It matters little how long I stay
In this world of sorrow, sin, and care ;
Whether in youth I'm called away,
Or live till my bones and pate are bare ;
But whether I do the best I can
To ease the weight of adversity's touch
On the faded face of my brother man,
It matters much.

It matters little where be my grave,
On the land or in the sea ;
By purling brook or 'mid stormy wave,
It matters little or naught to me ;
But whether the angel of death comes down,
And marks my brow with his loving touch,
As one who must wear the victor's crown,
It matters much.

—ANON.

Chapter II

LET'S GO TO POPLAR!

NO, you need not be in the least afraid. You will be perfectly safe. I will guarantee that no harm comes to you. I know my Poplar! I well remember my father, an old man, born and reared in the country, when he heard that I was to live in Poplar, had the most serious apprehensions as to my physical safety. At the best he thought the Poplar people were thieves and robbers! 'Whenever you go out,' he used to say, 'be sure to keep your coat buttoned, or they'll have your watch.' And a man once nearly got it in Aldgate!

I remember also the case of a young fellow from a North London suburb, who was arraigned on the capital charge at the Old Bailey. He was alleged to have murdered his sweetheart. When arrested a dagger was found upon him. He was asked to account for the possession of such a deadly weapon. His explanation was that, having to go to Poplar on business, he thought it prudent to carry a dagger to protect himself.

Poor fool! Had he only known Poplar he

would have saved himself the trouble of carrying any weapon at all. The simple truth is that he would have been safer in Poplar than in Piccadilly. And I know my Piccadilly ! It used to be said years ago, and it is equally true to-day, that ' there is no vice east of Temple Bar.' The dangerous places of London are in the West End. There you find the blackmailer, the human vampire, the social throwback, the unscrupulous scoundrel. Look after yourself when you are in those regions. But, by all means, leave behind your lethal weapons when you come to Poplar. There are as many ladies and gentlemen (in the best sense of the word) to the square mile in Poplar as in Piccadilly.

> ' The rank is but the guinea stamp,
> A man's a man for a' that.'

Did I hear you ask where Poplar is ? I will tell you. It is easily found. But not quite so easily as my poor old father imagined. He had never been to London. Rarely did he leave his native village. There he knew everybody and everybody knew him. Not an inch of ground in that village but was perfectly familiar to him.

I was saying good-bye as I left the cottage door, after pressing him to visit me.

' Good-bye ! my boy ! ' said he. ' I've made up my mind to come to London to see you.'

' Splendid, father ; that will be glorious ! ' I cried.

' Now,' he asked, ' which way do I turn when I come out of Euston station ? Is it to the right or to the left ? '

I had to explain, to his astonishment, that he would have to walk seven or eight miles from Euston, that he would have to pass along the most overcrowded bit of ground in the world, and that amid such a bewildering maze of traffic, in all probability since he was not accustomed to it, he would be run over and killed. Oh, no, it is not so easy as all that !

We will start with the Bank of England—that narrow pass through which surge those wonderful tides of traffic from East to West and West to East. From that strategic centre you quickly reach Aldgate, the eastern extremity of that square mile known as the City. Continue your way along the great Commercial Road, through Limehouse, for another two miles or so. Crossing the boundary of Limehouse, you are in Poplar.

Of course, you noticed the difference in the human tide after you left the Bank. On the western side of that world centre, passing St. Paul's, Ludgate Circus, Fleet Street, and the Strand, you were in the presence of wealth and privilege. You were in the region of silk hats and fur coats. Indeed, you were actually at the hub

of the world of gaiety, and fashion, and pleasure. Modern West London, as well as the historic City, is putting on new garments. Architects are giving us a new sense of beauty and strength. Men of business are showing their faith in the future by spending prodigious sums of money in preparation for the tide of prosperity when it begins its rise.

Oh, yes, there *is* a difference between East and West. When you step into our great East India Dock Road, you leave behind wealth and circumstance, silk hats and fur coats. You are in a world of ' do without.' Watch the people ! They wear the raiment of poor pilgrims in the toilsome ways of life. Their dress is threadbare, and generally they walk as those who do not see the end of the road. Now and again you catch the trace of bitterness, but not always. Acute personal misery has invaded innumerable homes. Cramped and narrowing conditions blur their vision and distort their views of life.

> ' The rich man sleeps in his stately home,
> To rest him from his labours ;
> The poor man sleeps in a council house,
> With his feet in his next door neighbour's.'

I wonder if you made a note of the groups of men standing here and there ? Some in overalls, others in patched and ragged clothes. These are our unemployed, and may be counted by the

thousand. The surplus humans in the world's market-place. Transport workers, labourers about the docks, and wharves, and railways—casual labourers for the most part, with occasionally men highly skilled at their particular job. There they stand with hopelessness written upon every line of their faces. This is not a phenomenon that one can speak of in mild and mellow language, it is unemployment—staggering, ghastly, demoralizing unemployment—with its awful results upon both mind and body.

But there is another sight in our streets that you cannot fail to see. These are the men of the sea. Burly sea-captains, alert young officers, smart engineers, vigorous and hefty sailor-men. They come among us pale-faced landsmen, 'tanned to the ruddy tan God's air doth give a man,' putting to shame our pallor and feebleness. Their rolling gait and rollicking humour make them ever welcome. They are brave men, simple men, and, for the most part, dependable men.

No, you cannot mistake them, these sailors of all grades and ranks. They are gregarious creatures, and must mix with their shipmates. So accustomed are they to the fo'c'sle and the lower deck, to a pow-wow whenever they can manage it, that even ashore they seek each other's company, and live a life apart. And did you

notice how they are always on the move ? To and fro, to and fro. They are used to it, keeping watch on dark nights, their eyes roving over the vast and trackless main, while they think their thoughts, and silently move up and down, up and down. Depending as we do upon the sea, we are the first to feel the pinch of bad trade. The loss of imports and exports first squeezes us. That is why poverty so constantly stalks along our streets.

And you will notice how the races meet in Poplar. There you are, cheek by jowl with wanderers from every land on earth. The Chinaman is there, the Japanese, the East and West Indian, the African negro—all the races are there, drawn by the lure of London. And what is more sinister still, with those who bear some positive racial characteristic are others with no well-defined racial pedigree at all. Like Babel of old, all languages are spoken, and some ' lingoes ' that cannot be classified as any language whatsoever.

Even in our Mission the races find their home. Mrs. Khan, with Mahommed Ali Khan, Bebe Rosetta Khan, Fatima Khan, are part of our family. Mrs. Hassan, whose husband is a Malayan from Singapore, the Ah Songs from China, Mrs. Nairulla, whose husband's name is Naquibulla Nairulla. He is a Pathan from

Afghanistan. Her little boy, Ramulla, comes with his mother to the services. The Cromarties, from the West Indies, are there, and the bright little children with black woolly hair, dark eyes, and dark skins attend our Sunday school. Signora Torrince, and her little boy, Luigi, from Italy, are part of us. There they are, all colours, languages, habits of thought, and we love them all. We acknowledge no colour-bar within our walls. Yes, there they are, with others whose place of origin finds no mention upon any map. A day in Poplar is a liberal education in practical geography.

And another striking thing you will in due time discover—the comparative warmth of Poplar. It is a providential boon, and yet, I suppose, works along the lines of cause and effect. Perhaps this accounts in some degree for the special brand of Poplar's mentality. Where houses stand huddled together, street on street, and where one house is made to do duty for four or five under normal conditions, each glowing with its heart of fire ; and chimneys belching heat and dirt ; and human creatures jostling and pressing one another, thawing the cold air with their warm breath, you feel the genial blessedness of the place.

It is just here where you feel the difference between the average provincial town of England, which stands congealed in cold fogs on its chill

river, and the generous warmth of this homely quarter of Greater London. It has a life all its own which defies definition. But you become conscious of a physical and mental atmosphere that generates a kindly outlook on life.

Probably this can be accounted for by the peculiar personality that Poplar has developed for itself. For surely a city possesses its own personality as definitely as does a man! In spite of its poverty, its discomfort, and its limitations, this restless, vivid, and many-coloured life dazzles and stimulates one with extraordinary power. It is so amusing, so instructive, so *alive*, that you look on fascinated and held in its grip.

And, of course, you know how original Poplar is in every expression of its virile personality. Most people in this world do literally and precisely what they are expected to do. But not so in Poplar. A world of people all behaving as they are commanded to do, and thinking and acting according to pattern, would produce universal paralysis and death. Poplar is always taking the world by surprise and shaking it out of its smugness. It resolutely refuses to be commonplace. It goes its own way in politics, expresses its own mind in local government, follows its own ideals in religion. Poplar flings its challenge of originality into the teeth of a tame and regularized world. It has given occasion for the extension of our

vocabulary—it has introduced ' Poplarism '—and whatever be our judgement upon it, we are bound to admit its novelty. Poplar is nothing if not alive, daring, and original.

But the one outstanding feature of Poplar is its atmosphere of mystery. Nobody can know Poplar until he has lived in it twenty years. Its secrets lie deep, and are only yielded to those who love it and patiently serve it. Ten thousand front doors conceal the mysteries of a hundred thousand lives. There is suffering in plenty, but it is cunningly camouflaged ; there is anxiety about to-morrow—nay, to-day—and straining eyes and wistful expressions are the sign and symbol of its intensity ; there is bitterness, resentment, challenge, and now and again these things come with tremendous impact upon some established evil, and the world wonders what is happening in Poplar. Above all, there is, miracle though it be, high courage and a deep sense of the humour of mortal things.

Few there are who know how their brothers and sisters live ! For the most part they go their way until some tragedy occurs, like the S.O.S. on the wireless, which speaks of missing boy or girl, with whom some dying mother longs for a final word. Then they wonder how such things can be. They have never known life in its high or low degree. They have been in an occasional

shower of rain, they have been tired in the usual way, or suffered some trifling discomfort, felt at the time and presently forgotten ; but they have never been given even a glimpse of the immeasurable strength or immoderate wrath, the wrath that passes exhausted, but never appeased—the wrath and fury of the passionate sea of human life. They have heard of it as a peaceable citizen in a quiet country town hears of battles, and famines, and floods, and yet knows nothing of what they mean. They sail over the placid surface of the sea of life, and at length reach a quiet harbour, ignorant of life to the last. They have never been made to see all that it may contain of perfidy, of violence or of terror. There are men thus fortunate—or thus disdained—by destiny. They never see.

Speaking of mystery—think of this :

In the years just before the War I was acquainted with a man who had come to reside in Poplar. He carried himself with dignity, wore a silk hat, and generally appeared before the world as a well-groomed, clean-shaven, bald-headed, elderly man. His conduct was so circumspect, and his bearing so genial, that in time he was invited to assist in taking the collection at the Sunday services ! !

One day I heard that he had been taken ill. Without invitation I called to see him. He lived

in a quiet backwater street, and occupied only one room. His landlady hesitated to let me in, but I gently insisted upon going up to his room. Upon opening the door, I found him in bed. He was surprised to see me, and apparently not very pleased. The room was bare and cold. Hardly any furniture was in the place. This came as a shock to me. Was this the same spick-and-span man of independent means whom we had been accustomed to meet? For this was how we regarded him. There was not a decent sheet on the bed. To induce warmth he had piled upon himself a mound of filthy sacks and the rags of an old hearthrug.

Moreover, there was a photograph on the wall. It represented a man with brown bushy beard and handsome head of hair. During a fitful conversation I turned to look at the photograph. Then I looked again more closely. I was curious. By and by my eyes strayed to the sick man on the bed. His face had taken on a deathly pallor. Like a flash it dawned upon me. He was none other than a man who some years before 'had left his country for his country's good'! He had committed a crime that had excited the wonder and curiosity of the civilized world. He perceived that I noticed the resemblance. After some talk he confided his secret to me. My suspicions were true. He had been hiding in a foreign country

for some years. Homesick, he returned to England, running the risk of detection, and had buried himself in Poplar. I was perplexed as to what I ought to do. Early next morning he decamped, leaving behind all his miserable belongings except the framed photograph of the brown-bearded man.

And what about this ?

One Saturday afternoon I had married a young couple. It was a very quiet affair. Only two others were in the church to witness the marriage contract. The bride and bridegroom were little more than boy and girl. The appeal of their youth and the abandon of their love made a profound impression upon me. When the ceremony was over and the register signed, the bride turned to me, and said, ' Will you come and have tea with us this afternoon, sir ? ' ' My dear,' I replied, ' I shall be charmed to come. What time will you have tea ? ' The time was fixed, and in about a couple of hours I was knocking at a door in one of our meanest streets. The bridegroom answered my knock, and, bubbling over with joy, flung wide the door as though he were welcoming me to a baronial hall. I soon found that they occupied only one room in the house, and that a mere box-room barely furnished. There were only two chairs, which, in view of there being three persons present, was somewhat

embarrassing. We escaped the difficulty by my suggesting that they two should occupy the one, and I would take the other ! It answered admirably.

Soon the bride began to pour out tea, and the three of us chatted merrily. Looking round upon the diminutive apartment, with a sweet smile and a kind of half-apology, she said, ' There isn't much of it, Mr. Lax, but what there is is all our own.'

' Yes, my dear,' I replied, ' You are now at the beginning. With frugality, and industry, and the blessing of God, you will soon out-grow this. Remember the words, " Them that honour Me I will honour." '

We dedicated their little home by the reading of scripture and prayer.

I was just leaving when the postman's two knocks loudly reverberated through the house.

The bridegroom ran down the stairs, leaving the bride and myself in conversation. Soon he returned, breathless with excitement.

' A letter from mother, dear ! ' he shouted, as he ascended the stairs.

Devouring the contents of the letter, before he could say a word, he at last turned with a smile, and held out a cheque for a large sum of money. I was dumbfounded.

It appeared that he belonged to an aristocratic family. Months before, he had fallen in love with

one of our poor girls. His family had objected to the marriage. He came to Poplar to earn his living, and to be near the girl of his choice. We were all ignorant of the noble estate to which he belonged. This letter was his mother's last minute consent to his marriage with a poor girl.

. . . . . .

Here we are, at last, in Poplar !

III

THE THEOLOGY OF THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

While walking through the trams and cars
I chanced to look up at the sky,
And saw that it was full of stars.

—James Stephens.

Chapter III

THE THEOLOGY OF THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

POPLAR on a cold night in November. Fine, drizzling rain overhead, thick, murky atmosphere all around, and adhesive mud, of the consistency of toothpaste, beneath the feet. In the roads, motor-horns make their strident music, on the river, ships' syrens sound their challenging notes. With such conditions, even a blind man, suddenly set in the midst, would rightly guess—Poplar.

I had just emerged from a quiet little alley off the High Street. My business there, the fulfilment of a promise that I would be at the last scene of a brave man's struggle for life.

'If I don't pull round, sir, yer'll be there to see me slip away?' said Teddy Taylor. 'I shan't feel so lonely, like.'

'All right, Teddy,' I replied, 'I'll be there.'

He had met with an accident some weeks before, and had fought hard for his life. But it was no use: he had to give in. Towards the end we watched him hour after hour. Day

wore into night. Then twelve struck. Now he was gone.

As I entered the deserted street, the cold midnight air, such as it was, was welcome. Hours in the heated atmosphere of a sick room leave one enervated in body and mind. Besides which, as I walked slowly along, I was oppressed with the problems of life, the mystery of personality, and that final experience of us all—death. As I sat by Teddy's bedside, holding his hand, I suddenly became aware that the spirit had escaped. Then I wondered, and wondered again, 'What is he doing now ?'

I was awakened out of my reverie by the striking of the clock in the church tower : it struck one.

By this time I was in the East India Dock Road, that great highway leading from the docks to the City. Certain public works were in progress. Three long rows of red lights, like crimson sentinels, guarding and guiding the traffic, met my eye.

Crossing the road at this point, I encountered the night watchman, Jimmy Jarvis. We were old friends, Jimmy and I. For many years he had been at this job, sleeping by day and watching by night. Like a lighted beacon in the darkness, he had guided many a foolish wanderer through the rocks and shoals of that dangerous sea called London.

'Good mornin', sir,' said Jimmy.

'Good morning,' I replied. I saw that he was sitting in his cabin with a bright red coke fire in front of him. I stopped to warm my hands.

'Bin to see another of 'em off, sir?' said he.

'Yes, Jimmy,' I answered. 'Teddy Taylor has just gone.'

'God rest his soul!' said the old man reverently.

'Amen!' I ejaculated.

'Sit dahn, sir,' said the night watchman, 'and 'ave a drink o' tea! It's a miserable night, an' a cup o' summat 'ot will warm the cockles o' yer 'eart.'

'So it will, Jimmy,' I replied. 'I'm longing for something to cheer me up.'

Fixing a box for me by the side of his cabin, he bade me make myself comfortable. At any rate, he offered me warmth, and, by good fortune, the rain had ceased.

Putting his billy-can on the fire, he seated himself as though he had something to say. The reflection of the incandescent coke lighted up his rugged face. His large hands were spread before him in a genial attitude of ease and content. A short pipe was in his mouth.

'So Teddy's gone, sir,' he said sadly.

'Yes,' I replied; 'he put up a plucky fight to the last.'

For two or three minutes neither of us said a word. Then Jimmy spoke.

' Life's a funny thing, sir,' he began. ' I sees a lot o' goin's on while I sit in this 'ere cabin. There's those as turns night into day : some of 'em is honest—an' some isn't. I can tell 'em, right enough. They're waiting for abaht two o'clock, an' when the old clock strikes the hour, then they gets a move on. I knows 'em : burglars an' thieves they are. Two o'clock is the time when they start their job.'

He looked into the can to see if the water was boiling.

' An' some of 'em is honest. Poor devils, dahn on their luck, an' I'm allus sorry for 'em. Yer can see 'em mouchin' abaht, wiv nowhere to sleep. The police is sharp on 'em, an' moves 'em on. Nobody wants 'em ! If it's rainin', or extra cold, I lets 'em come and stand by the fire.

' But, yer know, sir, it's the wimmin as gets at me. In their rags, wiv no boots worth speakin' of—it breaks my 'eart to see 'em. I never throws no bricks at 'em, pore devils ! If they've done wrong, they're payin' the price all right. Wot tales they've told me !

' Oh, yus, I sees a lot o' goin's on. I could write a book, if I 'ad a bit o' larnin'.

' One night a pore lad come along. 'E looked 'ungry, an' I giv 'im a bit o' my supper. I can't

abide to eat when somebody's watchin' every bite yer take, an' yer knows 'e's perishin' wiv 'unger.

' " 'Ere matey," I said, an' 'e ate it like a wolf.

' " Gawd bless yer, sonny!" I ses to 'im, quiet like.

' " Thank yer," he ses to me wistful like, " I wish Gawd was as good as yer. I'm allus 'ungry, but yer Gawd never gives me a bite!" He was dahnhearted, I could see, an' 'e was bitter. Pore devil! Yer know, sir, men can't think proper if their belly's empty. His belly was empty. I could see it in 'is face.

' " Gawd!" 'e ses, shoutin', " there ain't no Gawd!" An' 'e sneered.

' Then I talked to 'im, sir, soothin' like. " I'm sorry yer dahn on yer luck, matey: cheer up! p'raps things'll mend soon. But don't be silly; there is a Gawd! How does I know it? I'll tell yer. Who put they three rows o' red lamps i' their places, who filled 'em wiv oil? and who trimmed the wicks? Who's responsible for it? Did those lamps step into their places theirsel's? Did they decide to guide the traffic on their own? No, matey, I did it! An' who put the electric cable in the trench to giv' light to Poplar? Did it go there, because it thought it would? No, the gangs did it! I knows as things is not all right in this world, but don't blame Gawd, matey: it's us as is to blame!" '

By this time the water was boiling, and the night watchman made the tea. Handing me a small mug—keeping another for himself—we both drank deeply of the steaming hot beverage. It was like the nectar of the gods !

Then he resumed his story.

' " Well, matey," I ses, " if these 'ere lamps can't fix theirsel's, an' if this cable 'as to be put in by men, 'ow abaht everythin' we can see ? Wot abaht those lamps up in the sky ? Who puts the stars there ? An' wot abaht that summat wot thinks wot is right an' wot is wrong, an' lights up our way ? Wot abaht yersel', and wot abaht mysel ' ? Why," I ses, " there must be a Gawd ; it stands to reason." '

' I agree with you, Jimmy,' I said. ' You've thought it out all right.'

' But that's not all, sir,' he went on. ' There's summat in 'ere '—putting his hand on his heart—' that talks to me abaht Gawd. Just afore my missus died, 'er said, " Jimmy, my dear, good-bye ! " For a bit I couldn't say nuthin' : I was too full o' trouble. " Good-bye ! " 'er said again. " When yer' watchin' the roads of a night I shall come to yer, an' I shall ask Gawd to look arter yer." That's just like Mary, sir ! '

The old man's heart was full, and his voice broke.

' Yer remembers when yer buried 'er, sir ? It

was summer, an' the sun was shinin', an' the flowers looked lovely. Well, I've never felt 'er was in that grave. I've allus bin sure she was near me. 'Er comes sometimes when things is black, an' 'er says, " Jimmy, my dear, cheer up ! " An' when I'm a bit lonely like, 'er ses, " I'm 'ere, Jimmy ! " An' would yer believe it, sir, I finds mysel talkin' to 'er.'

Jimmy's eyes had a far-away look, and a faint smile flickered round his lips. I knew that even then he was holding sweet communion with the one who had gone, and yet was ever near him.

' 'Ave a drop more, sir ? ' he said, coming back to earth. The tea was getting pretty strong by this time, and the colour would hardly have pleased the connoisseur. Putting down his cup, he began again.

' I call to mind that sewer explosion, sir ; yer 'aven't forgotten it, either, I'll be bound. Three pore chaps lost their lives. It was close to my cabin.' (At the memory of it, he shuddered visibly.) ' It was terrible. I 'eard a rumblin' an' a shout. Ses I to mysel', there's summat wrong. Just then I see the 'ead of a sewer-man stickin' aht o' the 'ole.

' " 'Elp, mate ! " he ses, feeble like, an' then 'e dropped back into the 'ole. I knowed wot it was then !

' I'm 'shamed to say it, sir, but I 'eard a voice

inside wot said, " Jimmy, if yer goes dahn that 'ole, yer'll be a dead 'un ! " I was a coward, an' I wouldn't go.

' Then Mary come up to me, an' 'er ses, " Jimmy, my dear, be a man ! " I could go then, sir. I got one of 'em aht ; 'e was nearly gone. I giv' 'im a drink o' water. 'E ses, " Tell my wife . . . and my kiddies . . . to carry . . . on till I sees 'em again." I was 'oldin' 'im in my arms. " Good-bye, chum," 'e ses, brave-like, " good-bye ! " an' 'e was gone.'

Then the night watchman stopped for a minute.

' Yer knows, sir, we never ses good-bye when we're not goin' nowhere. When these wise blokes ses to me, There ain't no Gawd, an' there aint no nothin', I ses, Don't talk nonsense : it stands to reason ! There *is* a Gawd ! '

At that moment the church clock struck three.

' I say, Jimmy, it's three o'clock ; I must be off,' I said, taken by surprise. ' Good-bye ! '

' There yer are agen, sir, yer don't say good-bye when yer not goin' nowhere. It stands to reason ! '

' Good-bye, old friend,' I repeated, warmly gripping his hand.

' Good mornin', sir ! ' he replied.

IV
A DIPLOMAT AT LARGE

They never guess
That deep within them stand
Courage and peace and loveliness,
Wisdom and skill of hand.

—MASEFIELD : *The Hounds of Hell.*

Chapter IV

A DIPLOMAT AT LARGE

I MET Mrs. Bloomer in the street. Now Mrs. Bloomer was a widow.

'Good afternoon, Mrs. Bloomer!' said I cordially, extending my hand in greeting. 'How are you to-day?'

'Just middlin', thank yer,' she replied with detachment, slightly deflecting her eyes from my gaze.

'I haven't seen you at the Mission lately,' I went on, with a smile. 'I hope there is no trouble that keeps you away.'

'Yus, but there is, sir, an' very serious trouble, too,' she replied with asperity, at the same time tossing her head.

'I'm sorry—what may it be?' I inquired.

'I'm not comin' no more' she said.

'Well now, that would be a pity,' I replied.

'No, I'm not comin' no more, to be insulted.'

'Insulted?' I exclaimed.

'Yus, sir, insulted,' she continued, 'insulted in the 'ouse of Gawd!'

'And who insulted you?' I inquired.

'Why, it was that tall young man with long

black 'air,' she explained, red with indignation. ' 'E said to me, smilin' like, as I was goin' in, " Good evenin', miss ! " Yus, 'e called me miss !—miss, indeed !—a *disgraceful* name to give to a respectable married woman ! '

' But then, Mrs. Bloomer,' I replied diplomatically, ' I can quite understand why the young man should make such a mistake. Whoever would take you to be your age ? With your shingled hair and silk stockings, you look more like sixteen than sixty ! '

She here displayed the artfulness sometimes credited to widows, and looked at me archly, to see if I was serious.

' Does yer think so, sir ? ' she said, with a low voice and an eager smile.

' Yer know,' she continued, ' when I looked in the glass this mornin', I thought I looked young enough to get married agen ! '

' Certainly, Mrs. Bloomer,' I replied, with enthusiasm ; ' never give up hope ! '

' All right, sir, I'll be there on Sunday. Yer can tell the young man I've forgiven 'im.'

. . . . . .

I was advertised to lecture to my own people on ' Bunyan's Pilgrims in Modern Dress.' Considerable interest was aroused in the forthcoming event.

In the afternoon of the day upon which the

lecture was to be given, I called to see my old friend, Mrs. Blades. Now Mrs. Blades was very old, very stout, and very, very deaf. She sat in a low chair in the corner of her room. Her face beamed when she saw me enter.

A cup of tea, a little prayer, and I rose to leave.

'I'm sorry I can't come to-night, my dear,' she said. 'I could cry wi' disappointment.'

'Never mind,' I replied. 'I'll come and tell you about it one afternoon.'

'Wot are yer goin' to talk about?' she tearfully inquired in a high-pitched voice.

'Bunyan!' I loudly answered.

'Can't 'ear!' she bawled, staring with fixed eyes, and holding her hand behind her ear.

'Bunyan!' I repeated, with a shout, stooping down, and making a megaphone with my hands.

She looked startled, as though a new star had come within her ken.

'Bunions, did yer say? Bunions!' she cried, and her face lighted up with eager interest, 'Oh, I wish I could come; I'm nearly killed wi' 'em!'

. . . . . .

An elderly woman called to see me. She was a cook, recently employed by a bachelor gentleman in the West End of London, and had left her place. She asked her employer for the usual reference, which was duly handed to her.

I noticed an air of perplexity on her face as she

entered my study. She called to ask what I thought of the 'character' her late employer had given her. She opened an envelope and passed over to me a single sheet of notepaper. On it were written these words :

> Mrs. Patten has been my cook for six months ; it seemed much longer. She left on account of illness. My illness.
> (*Signed*) —— ——.

'I cannot make out what he means,' she said tearfully.

. . . . . .

I saw Tommy Craven in the distance. It was obvious that he was in trouble. He had taken more liquor than was good for him.

Hardly had he reached me before he began to pour out his tale of grievances. It appeared that he had been ejected from a club held in a certain public house. He was indignant. He would go to law. He would demand his rights. And with the loquacity inspired by alcohol he talked interminably.

'Wot d'*yer* think abaht it, sir?' he asked at length, with a look of exasperation.

'Well, Tommy,' I replied quietly, putting my hand upon his arm, 'I expect you were a little recalcitrant, weren't you?'

'A little wot?' he questioned, with a puzzled expression.

'Recalcitrant!' I repeated.

'Well, I'll be blowed!' he exclaimed, scratching his head. 'I've bin called all sorts o' things i' my time, but never afore 'ave I bin called a little wot'cher-call-it citron!'

. . . . . .

A woman asked me to call and see her husband who was ill.

Within a few hours I had made my way to the address given. Apparently the patient had not been informed of my coming.

As soon as he saw me enter the room, he sat up in bed, his eyes almost starting out of their sockets with astonishment and alarm. His lower jaw dropped.

'Good Lord!' he ejaculated, 'am I as bad as all that?'

. . . . . .

DEAR SIR could you call at No. 15 —— Street to see me and my husband who as had trouble and I don't know what to do he comes home at 7 Thanking you for troubling you I remain yours respectfully MRS. J. BROWN.

PS You married us in your Mission.

The following evening at half-past seven I made my way to the address given. There I found a young couple who had only been married a little over two years. I well remembered the day.

What a change the two years had brought ! They were very unhappy. The husband had plaster over one eye and sundry scratches on his face.

' She done that,' he said sullenly, pointing to his bruised features.

' Yus, that's orl right,' she retorted tearfully; ' only last week 'e was fined ten shillin's for assaultin' me, an' 'e sed it was cheap and well worth five pound.'

' But what started the trouble ? ' I inquired.

' Her wouldn't buy me a pair o' socks,' he replied, ' so I put on 'er silk stockins'.'

' Well, and what then ? ' I asked.

' Her chased me with a knife,' he replied.

' And what did she say ? '

' Oh, her sed nothin', only that she would cut my throat.'

I could see that the position was pretty desperate.

' Is there nothing you two young people can do to make it up ? ' I asked.

' No,' he replied peevishly, ' I'm fed up wiv 'er tongue ; it's the nearest thing there is to perpetual motion ! '

' Well, now, Mrs. Brown, what have you to say about it ? ' I inquired.

Upon this she began to pour out her troubles, raking up all sorts of real and imaginary grievances. By and by he began to grow restive, and looked

up at the loud-ticking timepiece on the mantel, as though he would go out of the room.

'That will do, Mrs. Brown,' I chimed in. 'You know I'm supposed to say a word sometimes.'

It was difficult to know what to say.

I saw that they hadn't had their evening meal, and knew, of course, that it would never do to leave them at that point.

'Look here,' I said, 'let's have some tea! It's bitterly cold, and just the night for buttered toast. I'll toast the bread, if you'll make the tea. Now, Mrs. Brown!'

'I've got a tin o' salmon,' she said.

'They'll go together all right,' I declared. 'That's splendid!'

'You get washed, Jim,' I suggested; 'tea will be ready in five minutes.'

Soon we were seated at the table. Conversation dragged somewhat. I did most of the talking. Finally I drifted to the subject of the wedding. What a lovely day it was! How beautiful she looked! She made a bonnie bride. How proud he was of her as they walked along the aisle of the church! And how we covered them with confetti!

At that moment I pulled out a snapshot which a friend had taken as they stood in the porch. She was radiant in her white dress, and he stood by her side, every inch a man. The crowd surged

round the taxi ; confetti fell like showers of snow ; shouts and laughter filled the air. What a glorious day it was !

I passed the snapshot across to them.

Soon tears began to fall down the face of the poor girl, and her lips quivered pitifully.

She gazed upon it. Again and again she dried her tears, to see the photograph the better.

Then Jim took it in his hand. For awhile he uttered not a word. His jaw squared and his lips tightened. That little snap had gripped him. Putting it down on the table, he turned to look at his wife, and a tear crept out of his eye.

' Oh, Jim,' she wailed, ' will yer forgive me ? I've bin so nasty, but I'm sorry.'

At the sight of the poor girl's tears, Jim began to feel uncomfortable, and he brushed his coat-sleeve across his face.

Rising from his chair, he threw his arms around his penitent, conscience-stricken wife. I left them alone. In a few minutes they had made it up.

' Now, Jim,' said I, ' take her to the pictures. They're showing *Ben Hur* at the Pavilion. Go into the best seats. It'll be dark at the back, you know, and you'll be quieter. Put your arm around her now and again, and kiss her like you used to do. You understand ? '

' I understand,' he replied, with a knowing nod of his head.

Away they went. They have been happy ever since. The snapshot did it. It is now on their mantel, in a silver frame.

. . . . . .

I was leaving the Mission one night about half-past nine, making my way home after a long day.

As I stepped into the street a man cannoned into me, in his haste and excitement. It was George Bate.

'Hello, George!' I exclaimed, rubbing the place where it hurt. 'What's the matter?'

'Oh, Mr. Lax, I'm in such an 'ole,' he cried, 'in a terrible 'ole.'

His face was haggard and white, and he looked like a man who had reached the end of all things.

'Sorry to hear it,' I said. 'Come into the vestry and tell me the trouble.'

As soon as we were seated, he began to wring his hands, and to say all sorts of wild things. He was clearly in a bad way.

'Now, pull yourself together,' I urged, 'and tell me what is upsetting you.'

He ransacked his pockets for a handkerchief, for in his nervous excitement both eyes and nose were keeping him busy. The nearest approach to a handkerchief he could find was a glove. With this he began a vigorous cleaning-up process.

'The broker's man is in,' he began, at length.

'Where?' I asked.

' In our 'ouse,' he explained.

' The broker's man in your house ? ' I slowly ejaculated. ' What's he there for ? '

' I owe some money,' he sobbed, ' an'—an'—'e says 'e won't go till it's paid.'

There was a minute's silence.

' Well,' I said, ' what can I do ? '

' It's like this,' he explained, ' yer know my mother-in-law lives with us ; an' she has put us down for some money in her will. If she knows it's the broker's man we've got in, she'll alter the will, and we shan't get a penny ! '

' How do you know that ? ' I asked.

' Oh,' he answered, with a weary shake of his head, ' I know my mother-in-law.'

' Does your wife know who the man is ? ' I pursued.

' No, she doesn't,' he replied, ' an' I daren't let 'er know.'

The plot seemed to thicken. So I asked how I could help him.

' Well,' he answered, with a most appealing look, ' I wondered if yer would come an' 'ave supper with us, an' be friendly like with the broker's man, then the old lady will be put off the scent, an' not be suspicious, don't-cher-see ? '

' Oh, I see ! ' I slowly drawled, rubbing my chin. It was dawning upon me. I was to be the

invited guest—the broker's man was to be my friend.

'Don't say yer won't come, Mr. Lax,' he wailed again. 'I'm in *such* an 'ole. *An' I've told 'em yer comin' !* Don't-cher-see ? '

'Come along ! ' I said, and we walked towards his house. Touched by the poor fellow's plight, I could do no other.

'How much does the broker's man want ? ' I queried.

'Seventeen pound ten,' was the bitter reply, 'an' I 'aven't a penny in the world. I'm in *such* an 'ole ! '

Soon we arrived at the house. A sharp rat-tat-tat brought the old lady to the door.

''Ere is our guest, grandma,' said George, feigning a merry voice. 'Mr. Lax was very busy, but he was determined to come.'

'Good evenin', sir,' said the old lady. 'I'm glad to see you. It's nice to have George's friends like this. He's a dear boy.' And she smiled a welcome.

In the front room was seated my fellow-guest, the broker's man. He was a big, rough, uncouth sort of fellow, with a few days' growth of beard on his chin. He smoked a strong tobacco and pulled at his pipe without ceasing.

'Good evenin', ' he said gruffly, in reply to my greeting. 'I'm not particular abaht the company

I keeps, but I'm allus glad to meet a gentleman.'

We soon settled down to conversation as though we were old friends.

The wife was busy with the preparation of the supper, and in a few minutes we were all seated at the table.

'I'm fond o' good vittles, I am,' said my fellow guest, 'an' I knows a good beefsteak from a red herrin'.'

'Oh, yes,' said the old lady, a little shocked I thought.

George looked at me appealingly, as though he wanted me to talk as much as possible, in order to stop his other visitor from giving his scheme away. So I talked on and on. The broker's man could hardly get a word in at all.

In about an hour the meal was finished. The mother-in-law assisted the daughter in clearing the table, and soon, much to George's relief, both were out of the room. He shot at me a most grateful expression, which, interpreted, meant, 'Please keep on with your stories!'

'Yer knows who I am, I suppose?' said the broker's man, turning to me, with a wink.

'Yes,' I replied shortly.

'An' I don't go aht o' this 'ouse wiv'out seventeen pound ten,' he continued.

'That's a lot of money,' I said, with a shake of the head.

'I don't mind makin' it seventeen quid, but not a penny less—seventeen quid!' said the Shylock.

Just then the two women returned, and the game of bluff was renewed.

I raked up stories old and new, started political discussions, and even tried to explain Einstein's theory of relativity! Anything to scotch the broker's man, lest he should spoil everything by blurting out the real purpose of his presence.

'Now, granny dear, 'adn't yer better go to bed?' suggested George, about midnight. 'Yer'll be tired in the mornin'.'

'I'm tired now,' snapped the old lady.

After a little while she left us, hoping we should both come again. She *'ad* enjoyed 'erself.

The wife soon followed her mother. It was nearly one o'clock.

'Nah, guv'nor,' said the broker's man, 'wot's it to be? If I don't get seventeen quid by eight o'clock this mornin', I shall put my 'and on that sideboard and that easy chair, and—that clock!'

George gasped.

'Dear me,' he sighed, 'I'm in *such* an 'ole.'

'What can you do, George?' I asked.

'I 'aven't a penny,' he groaned, wringing his hands.

'Nothin' less than seventeen pound ten,'

reiterated the broker's man emphasizing his words with a bang on the table.

He sat back and puffed a cloud of smoke up to the ceiling.

I argued, pleaded, cajoled, but the man was adamant. Two o'clock struck.

A shrill voice was heard at the top of the stairs.

' 'Ow long are yer goin' to stop, disturbing people's sleep ? ' It was the old lady.

' Oh, dear,' said the poor wretch, ' she'll alter 'er will.'

' Mr. Lax,' he cried, kneeling at my feet, ' will yer lend me the money ? I'm in such an 'ole ! I'll pay yer back.'

Then I offered ten pounds to the broker's man. I appealed to his sense of pity, and pointed to the poor distraught George.

' Well, sir,' said the B.M., ' I like to see a gentleman, an' a sport. Yes, I'll take ten quid.'

I tendered an I O U for ten pounds. It was then nearly three o'clock.

With a deep sigh of relief George saw his unwanted guest depart, and, as soon as possible, I followed.

' Thank yer, sir,' said my grateful, but bewildered host, ' yer've 'elped me out of *such* an 'ole.'

I'm afraid that George was a muddler, for I haven't seen my ten pounds since.

V
THE FIELD-MARSHAL

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say, ' These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
Old men forget ; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day.

—SHAKESPEARE : *Henry V.*

Chapter V

THE FIELD-MARSHAL

HIS name was William Boffin, or, as we commonly called him, Billy Boffin. As a matter of fact, he once declared to me privately that his surname had a twin—FitzClarence—his full name, as it appeared on his baptismal certificate, being William FitzClarence-Boffin. This striking nomenclature rather impressed one with the dignity of his origins. Anyhow, whatever his name, he was born in Poplar. His father made his share of the family income by peddling odds and ends. His mother added to it by doing daily domestic work—that is, she was a charlady. It was a precarious existence. Billy learnt no trade. He picked up scraps of money—and other things—as a boy, and was generally at a loose end.

In a shiftless, indifferent way he lounged through life up to the age of eighteen. Then the Boer War broke out. Like thousands of others, he joined the Army, and in due season found himself in South Africa. That disappointing campaign ran its weary course, bringing little credit or honour to either military or political leadership.

Billy Boffin came out of it with the Victoria Cross. For some wildly meritorious deed—when the ' FitzClarence ' within him temporarily emerged—he received the coveted distinction—V.C. And right proudly did he wear it. His chest expansion visibly increased. Upon the smallest provocation he squared his shoulders to provide the necessary background for the honoured and honourable possession. That bit of bronze was the watershed of his military glory, the high tableland from which he surveyed life.

The Boer War over, his regiment went to India. Under the sweltering skies of South India he passed the remaining years of his military service. Then he returned to England, with his papers duly endorsed, Sergeant William Boffin, V.C.

By this time he was a middle-aged man. Moreover, he was tall and broad, and weighed about fourteen stones. As the years went on he cultivated a beard like a patriarch—a full, robust, brown beard. With the usual perversity of mortal things, however, the more the hair grew on his chin, the less it covered his head. In time he became as bald as an egg. This was a disappointment to him. But by sedulous care he made the most of his beard, and so added dignity and distinction to his general bearing.

It was sad to see that Billy did not enjoy good health. His constitution had obviously suffered

from his African and Indian experiences. Particularly did he feel the asperity of our English winter. He never married. Always more or less lonely, he lived a life apart. Twenty-three years' absence from Poplar had made a difference; he was unfamiliar with the new situation. Of course, his father and mother were gone, and when I first made his acquaintance he had few friends.

Unfortunately, he had a long spell of unemployment. Having no trade in his fingers, and being unequal to hard, laborious work, he was at a great disadvantage in the labour market. This produced considerable bitterness. His pension just enabled him to live, but he had no margin for a few extras. He chafed at his circumstances. Now and again he would hold the precious bit of bronze in his hand, and talk to it, saying that he and it were both unwanted.

I paid periodical visits to Billy's one room. It was generally the occasion for a cup of tea and a long chat. Twice a year our meeting was regarded as a sort of state occasion. These were on the anniversary of his winning the V.C. and the anniversary of his mother's death. We had high tea, he wore the precious distinction, and recited, almost word for word, how he won the Cross. It appeared that during a reconnaissance a cavalry squad had been ambushed by the Boers. They were caught in a donga and were constantly

being sniped at by the brilliant enemy, with fatal results. Sergeant Boffin heard of this, and, taking a number of troops, set out to rescue the squad, who were commanded by a major. With the utmost intrepidity, he spent the night hours in crawling across the veldt to the donga, dodging the Boer marksmen, picking up a wounded officer or man, and taking them to a place of safety. Before morning every living man had been rescued. The horses had been given their freedom—some had been killed, but several had found their way back to camp, more or less wounded. Billy, to use his own expression, ' had been badly punctured,' but a few weeks in hospital put him right.

The papers were full of this exploit, and loudly acclaimed the justice and good sense of the military authorities in conferring on Sergeant Boffin the Victoria Cross.

Billy's face was a picture as he lived again through the thrilling episode, and I made an appreciative audience on each occasion, although I knew every word that was to come.

One day a cinema manager asked me if I knew of a man who could be trusted as a commissionaire. He must be a steady man, of good appearance, and able to make a favourable impression on the public. It would count in his favour if he had seen military service, and he must be willing to wear a uniform.

With enthusiasm I replied that I knew the very man for the job, and that he should be round at the cinema for an interview in an hour or two. Billy almost jumped for joy at the good news, and, after brightening himself up, made his way to the manager's office.

The applicant fulfilled every condition save one. He must be clean-shaven ! Billy's beard was the stumbling-block. A momentary spasm, and he had made the decision to part with the beard. It would be better to be a cinema doorman beardless, than to be unemployed with the finest beard ever grown ! Besides, he would be earning a living. He would be no longer a lounger. And, best of all, he would be wearing a uniform again !

He got the job. For a few days he performed his duties minus the uniform. He had every qualification. He was tall, broad, rather heavy, a touch of military swagger, and a deep, guttural voice. Could anything be more appropriate than that Sergeant William FitzClarence-Boffin, V.C., should occupy the responsible position of commissionaire, standing on parade in front of the brilliantly lighted theatre, where drama, comedy, history, and music were, in the grand manner, set before the admiring public ? The stars in their courses acclaimed the arrangement !

Never shall I forget the evening upon which I first saw Billy in all his glory of figure and uniform.

There he stood, attired (no other word suits the occasion) in red trousers, with broad gold stripes along the seams, blue greatcoat, with more gold lines along the seams, a white belt around his waist, and massive silver epaulets surmounting all. A cocked hat was upon his head. He was parading in the entrance hall of the cinema. To my surprise, his beard was gone. But he had paid particular attention to his moustache. It was at least seven and a half inches from tip to tip, and waxed in the approved fashion. It gave him a fierce expression, and reminded one of the horns of highland cattle. As we became familiar with his new rôle, we found that the moustache was the barometer of his moods, and indicated fair or foul weather. When conditions were fair the horns stretched placidly across the dial of his face. When foul weather was working up, the horns twitched ominously, but when the storm was at its height they moved like a conductor's baton, and knowing observers kept a good look-out !

Billy's glory was upon every one's lips. He shed distinction on the establishment that was fortunate enough to retain his services. We called him the Field-Marshal. This gave him secret pleasure, and he played up to the part. When a big film was being shown he rose to the occasion. He marshalled the crowds and gave orders in the style of a grand review.

Of course, as in every other cup of honey, there was the inevitable drop of gall. His troubles came from the Poplar gamins. When they first beheld this brilliant apparition they stood in awe. They whispered in his presence. They assembled in herds and passed judgement collectively.

'He's a general,' said one.

'Nah, he's not,' declared another, 'He's a Field-Marshal: my farver told me so.'

'Garn,' sneered a third, 'he's nuthin' but a chucker-aht.'

They moved past the presence in silence, always keeping at a respectful distance.

As the weeks went on they paid the modest fee to go into the cheap seats, and, as a cat may look at a king, so they got a close-up view of the Field-Marshal. Nothing happened. Then familiarity bred contempt, and the youngsters became facetious, taunting, sarcastic.

'He thinks he's summat, he does,' said one. 'Why, yer can buy his sort at Woolworth's for thrippence.'

'Where did yer get that 'at?' inquired another.

'He doesn't go 'ome in those togs', 'e doesn't. 'E lives in our buildings, and I sees 'im in an old pair o' trousis, carryin' aht the cinders like my farver does. 'E's a swank, 'e is!'

All this was said within hearing of the Field-Marshal, and was gall and bitterness to him.

'Git h'off!' cried Billy, his moustache twitching ominously.

'Git h'off wi' yersel!' they retorted, meanwhile shrewdly keeping out of range of the stout stick he carried like a sword.

And so the contest went on. Billy assumed a brave, blustering attitude, while the young hooligans stood in front of the brilliantly lighted entrance hall, addressing every kind of opprobrious remark they could conceive.

The climax came one cold, wet, winter evening. A special film was being exhibited. The public rolled up in their thousands. Long queues had to be skilfully marshalled. The Field-Marshal was attired in full dress, and the hour discovered him at his high tide of ostentation. His moustache was perfectly waxed, eyebrows bushier than usual, and his boots polished to the point of brilliance. He was fourteen stones of dignity! Moving to and fro he displayed the confidence of a master of ceremonies.

His persecutors loitered in front of their prey. They gathered in groups and looked mysterious—meanwhile emitting taunts and jeers.

Having occasion to speak to the young lady in the pay-box, he turned his back upon his tormentors. This was, on his part, a false move. Instantly about twenty-five feet of linen thread, with a dozen fish-hooks attached at the end, shot out

at the gorgeous salmon ! The fish-hooks alighted on the cocked hat, a quick pull, and lo ! the stately headgear rolled on the ground. Turning round, the Field-Marshal quickly took in the situation. One hand shot up to cover his bald head, and the other reached out vainly after the receding cocked hat ! Ribald laughter filled the air, and a score of scurrying forms spread fanwise in wild retreat. He was indignant ! He was horrified ! The blood rushed to his face. The moustache rose and fell, tremulous with suppressed eloquence. He started in hot pursuit. Vengeance was in his heart. Looking at the retreating figures, he selected the one towing the cocked hat, and went, all out, after him. But it was an uneven race. Fourteen stones avoirdupois, clad in heavy garments, was no match for a light-footed, under-clad young urchin. The fates were against the Field-Marshal. A sodden banana-skin was his undoing. He unluckily stepped upon it. Instantly his feet shot from under him. and he lay on his back in the mud ! Poor Field-Marshal ! What could he do ? He picked himself up, and limped back a sad and crestfallen man.

This incident proved the turning-point in his life. He never lifted up his head again. His self-respect had suffered damage, and his dignity was sorely injured. New headgear was provided—an ordinary military cap with wide crown

and deep peak. But it was clearly a makeshift. He was shorn of his glory. Worst of all, his spirit was broken. He had been a cavalry sergeant! He had won the most coveted distinction that the profession of arms could confer! Was he not a V.C.? His nerve was gone. He accepted defeat.

After several spells of illness, he gave up the cinema. He was obviously a stricken man. I was his closest friend, and rarely a day passed without my seeing him. I did everything I could to put cheer and courage into his soul. But it was no good.

I remember the last anniversary of the winning of the Cross. He sat up in bed. The Cross was pinned on his nightshirt. He painfully laboured through his recital of the stirring event. But it was a pitiful struggle, and he soon lay down to rest.

'I wanted . . . to live . . . till to-day,' he said. 'I'm satisfied.'

It then dawned upon me that he was nearing the end.

He distributed his few belongings to relatives. I was to see that they reached their proper destinations. The Victoria Cross, his most precious possession, was to go to a nephew in America.

A little while before the final scene he began to speak of the future. He wanted heaven. Earth

had been disappointing. Gradually light and joy suffused his face.

I held his hand, while he lay still with his eyes on the ceiling.

Billy turned his head towards me, and I saw that he wanted to speak.

'Do you think . . . the V.C. . . . will make any . . . difference . . . up yonder, sir?' he said.

'What do you mean, Billy?' I asked.

'Why, sir,' he went on slowly, 'when I report to . . . my Commander-in-Chief . . . do you think He . . . will like to hear . . . of the Cross?'

'I'm sure He will, Billy,' I replied, 'and He will say "Well done!"'

He lay in silence.

'You know, Billy,' I continued, 'you won it by risking your life for others. That was what our Saviour did—He took all the risks, and He'll understand.'

'Ah, that'll be all right,' he said, with a faint smile.

He fell into a light sleep, and the slowly ticking clock made the midnight feel lonely.

In the early hours he awoke again, and looked surprised to see me still there.

I saw he wanted to speak, so I leaned over to him.

'Will the General think it haughty, like, if I mention the Cross, sir?'

'No, Billy,' I said, 'by no means. Tell Him.'

He smiled.

Within a few minutes his lips moved, and his hand slipped to his forehead.

I leaned down to listen.

'Sergeant William FitzClarence-Boffin, V.C.'

He had given his last salute.

VI
AS I SEE LIFE

Knowledge we ask not—knowledge Thou hast lent,
But, Lord, the will—there lies our bitter need;
Give me to build above the deep intent
The deed, the deed.

—DRINKWATER: *Poems*, 1908–1914.

Chapter VI

AS I SEE LIFE

ONE of the saddest things to be observed in the life of to-day is surely its pessimism. Despair appears to be written on the countenances of multitudes. Eyes are faded and sad ; the whole expression is cynical. And the tragedy is all the greater when we remember that it is youth and middle-age which are the principal victims.

Few ministers and social workers in close touch with the life of the masses but can give instances of the appalling shadows that cloud the lives of thousands. Rich and poor, cultured and ignorant, professional men and manual workers, are all alike sufferers from this poisonous virus.

Scarcely a day passes without some man or woman turning to suicide as a way out of their troubles. Nearly always it is some personal sorrow that has bitten into the soul. Frequently it is a story of folly and sin. Sometimes it is the wrongdoing of others that has induced despair. Truly, ' man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn.' But, whatever the cause, the effect is tragic beyond words.

Another poignant occasion of distress and revolt is the sense of limitation and barrier that hampers and hedges the spirit. Right down the ages the bitter cry of the baulked and baffled soul rends the air in its hot protest against the seeming injustice of things. Said one of old, 'Why does God give light to a man whom He has hedged in?' And he charged God with folly and cruelty. The modern form of expression may be different from that of old, but the spirit of revolt is the same. Truly the word most commonly used in the human vocabulary is 'Why?'

In the course of one day's visitation I came across three human documents that made a tremendous appeal to my sympathy. The victims bitterly complained of the hedges that enclosed them.

I will take them in order.

The first was the Economic Hedge. A man and wife, whom I knew well, were all in all to each other. The wife was an invalid. Like the woman in the Gospels, she had spent all she had in the hope of cure, but was no better, indeed rather grew worse. As I said good-bye I felt sure that her days were numbered. The husband asked me if nothing could be done. Taking my courage in both hands, I spoke on the telephone to an eminent physician in Harley Street, and asked if he would see the patient. He readily consented.

The following day I accompanied the husband and wife to the great doctor's house. With the utmost tenderness and patience he examined the sick woman. The only thing to be done was for the patient to live in South America ! That might prolong her life. ' But,' said the distracted husband, ' Doctor, I haven't money to take her there, and if we got there my kind of work is not wanted in that country.' We thanked the doctor, and helped the poor patient back to the taxi. They were hedged in by the Economic Barrier. Why ? they asked.

The second was the Physical Hedge. My friend, whom many regarded as the victim of malevolent fate, was a musician of rare quality. He lived in the realm of beauty. Music was the life-blood of his soul. The violin was his constant companion, and from that gracious comradeship came forth the sweetest harmonies. To his immediate circle of friends there were few joys so exquisite as those that proceeded from impromptu performances in his own home. In certain moods he was as one divinely inspired. Touch, tone, and *tempo* appeared as a revelation from the unseen. At such moments speech was profanity.

His character was equally fine. A certain grace and strength suffused him like a personal aroma, the atmosphere created by his unique personality.

But my friend was an epileptic ! He was

bound within the prison of a cruel Physical Hedge. Pain, weakness, suspense, were his perpetual portion. Deep and bitter depression clouded his mind. It was as though he lived with the blinds of his soul-windows continually drawn !

He had youth, ambition, visions of service to the community, and a natural desire to excel in that sphere in which he found such consummate joy. But all these were of no avail. The prize he desired could not be his. The utmost he could hope for was a very narrow range of achievement, and even that was purchased at a bitter price. The spirit was willing, eager, capable, but the flesh was weak.

How often he turned to me with the old, old question—Why ?

The third was the Moral Hedge. A bright and bonnie boy whom I knew was a cripple. He was eight years old. The surgeons said he would never walk. The only way by which he could get about was by being wheeled in a spinal chair. Sometimes his mother, or a kind neighbour, would wheel him around the streets. His spine was weak. He could not even sit up. People gave him little presents—toys, books, sweets. But the poor little fellow did not want toys, books, or sweets, except for a little while. What he wanted was to get up and play, to run about like other boys. One day he saw boys playing football in the street, and

his eyes grew large as he watched the thrilling game. 'Oh, Mr. Lax,' he cried, 'why can't I play football? Shall I ever play football?' And poor Jimmy sobbed as though his heart would break. He was facing, all unknown to himself, the Moral Barrier. I could not explain to him the law of the solidarity of the race. It was useless to talk to him about somebody else's wrongdoing. He could not get away from his weakness, and was full of anxious questioning.

These, then, are three examples of 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.' They are instances of the hedges that hinder and hurt the victims of circumstances.

How do the limitations of life do us good? It is impossible for any one to make it clear to another in every instance. A few illustrations may, however, light up a dark and difficult subject.

Let us take the Economic Barrier. We would all like to do just as we pleased—to take holidays, to go everywhere, and enjoy everything, just as whim and caprice required. But the Economic Barrier hedges us in. Suppose this limitation were suddenly removed. Suppose that for a year we could all do as we liked—live on rich foods, ride in royal trains, deck ourselves in jewellery, work when we wished, and play when we wanted. Why, at the end of the year the world would be bankrupt. All trade and commerce would be

thrown out of gear; we should be unfitted for common duties. Chaos would reign everywhere.

I have seen native tribes in Africa who live a life of ease. They are fed by what they call the bread tree, and are clothed by the simple vegetation around them. How simple such a life seems, and in certain moods how attractive. But we do not go to Central Africa for the great leaders of the world. We go to the lands of grey skies and bitter winds and challenging climates for the men who shape humanity's destiny. Our barriers have developed in us the spirit of endurance and triumph. The two great words of our race, Duty and Discipline, have made us. When pleasure would have chosen Honolulu, duty has decreed Poplar. And duty done in Poplar brings out the big things of a man, and produces victory.

Or take the Moral Barrier. Suppose God had not given us a conscience. Imagine every man being able to do exactly as he liked. Conscience, remember, is the unseen judge, policeman, preacher, guardian angel that every man has within him. Suppose that suddenly the moral barrier was removed, or refused to function. Suppose that wrongdoing had no penalties, that a man could sin with impunity, knowing that there would be no ill results in his own life, or in the lives of others. The result would be hell on earth. The issue would be inconceivable. The

Moral Barrier, in spite of its seeming cruelty, is the guarantee of our physical and spiritual safety.

But let us notice that there is one way in which we are never hedged in. We are sometimes hedged in from wealth and privilege, from pleasures and knowledge and long life. But we are never shut off from God! There may be a hedge around us, but the sky is always overhead. Take the case of Job. He was surrounded by the hedge of poverty, disease, and mystery. But all this did not shut him away from God. Nay, these very things made him long to see God face to face. 'Oh that I knew where I might find Him!' This was a prayer he would never have uttered but for the thick and painful hedge that fenced him round. His old life had been happy, but it never made him long for God as did his life of trial. And this prayer was answered. When all his earthly friends and teachers failed, it was God who drew near to Job, and answered him. That, it seems to me, is the great lesson of life. High and thick hedges shut us in to God, and leave the sky open to us.

The next thing is hardly less important. A hedge may shut us in, but it shuts us in to a definite plot of ground. The enclosure may be small, but it *is* an enclosure. When we are shut in we can at least do spadework in the little plot. God shuts us up to some duty—irksome, perhaps,

but still a duty. So it was with Job. Before, the care of his wealth and the thought of his family, the dignity of his position, left little time for meditation and lonely prayer. True, we are told that Job was upright, and offered sacrifice for his sons. But his soul needed more than a ritual for his religion. It needed a refining fire. It was the secret corners of his heart that God wished to make His own. And his trials exposed them to the light.

Now it is just so with us. We are all hedged in. But we are all hedged in to some duty. We cannot, perhaps, do great things in the spacious places of the world, but we can sanctify our own hearts. There is plenty of work to be done in the little plot of ground where we are hedged in.

Let us thank God for the hedge with which He has encircled us. And let us apply this thought to our own heart. We all have some 'might have been' which grieves us, or some burden which weighs us down. Perhaps we have lost money, and find it hard to make our way through the world's turmoil; or perhaps our strength is small and we cannot do what our heart longs to do; or perchance we are perplexed by the mystery of life, and wonder if what we believe is, after all, true.

Let us be of good cheer. Depend upon it, this limitation, this thwarting, is for our good. Are we shut in from many pleasures? God would

have us more completely for Himself. Has our earthly treasure dwindled or disappeared? He would have us know that our treasure is in heaven, where our heart may be also.

It is possible, therefore, to make the plot of ground where we are hedged in, a very garden, where lovely flowers grow, where sweet fragrances pervade the air, and where birds sing their songs. Spadework and prayer will do it. Speech with God and fidelity to duty will transform the wilderness into a garden.

I well remember a family, dear friends of mine, to whom this truth was abundantly made clear. There were three of them, father, mother, and daughter, a charming girl of eighteen. She was the light of the home and the joy of her parents' hearts. Her father positively idolized her. She was gifted with a sweet and gracious disposition. Goodness seemed easy to her.

She fell ill during an influenza scourge. Before we could quite realize the tragic truth, she was gone. The grief-stricken parents refused to believe it. It couldn't be true!

I hastened to her bedside, hoping to be near at the end. I was just too late. The house was darkened. Silence reigned. In the death-chamber the doctor still sat looking at the white form on the bed. The father supported his wife. Their faces were drawn and their souls devastated.

It was like Luke Fildes' great picture, 'The Doctor,' enacted in real life.

As I entered the room, the father turned to me. Revolt, challenge, rebellion leaped into his eyes.

'Yes, this is just like God ! *Just like God !*' he cried in agony. 'He lets us keep Nell for eighteen years, and when we want her most He takes her away. It's not fair ! It's not fair !'

The parents clung to each other, as though they were afraid that even one of them might be taken. It was tragic beyond all expression.

Months passed. Often had we prayed, and talked, and tried to trust. But it seemed so hard.

One day I went to comfort the stricken couple. Time had seemed to do little in healing the wound. But now something had changed the situation. The mother met me with a smile. Her face was lighted up with a new glory. I wondered what had happened. She repeated these simple lines :

'Who plucked this lovely flower ? The Master.
And the gardener held his peace.'

. . . . . .

'The roses of joy are red,
The roses of pain are white ;
But I think, when the day is sped,
And I stand by the gate at night,
I shall know just this, when the day is dead,
That a rose is sweet, be it white or red.'

VII
THE PAVEMENT TRAGEDY

Bound who should conquer,
Slaves who should be kings.

—Myers.

Chapter VII

THE PAVEMENT TRAGEDY

IT was about eight o'clock on a summer evening. The day had been hot. Everybody moved with languor. Even the children sprawled in the gutters. The oppressive atmosphere made movement a misery. The ' dog days ' in Poplar can make one wish for ' some vast contiguity of shade.'

I was slowly making my way home, bareheaded, along one of our back streets, intending to turn into the first road on the left. On reaching the corner, a man ran towards me in a considerable state of agitation.

' Eh, guv'nor,' he cried, ' two women are 'aving a scrap dahn this street—they're goin' to kill one another.'

I looked in the direction to which he pointed. There stood two women face to face. For the moment active hostilities had ceased. They were a few paces apart, fiercely glaring at one another. Each bore marks of combat, and one triumphantly waved a handful of hair as a trophy of war.

Deeply moved at this saddest of all sights, I

hastened towards them upon my errand of reconciliation and peace. Clearly they were under the influence of liquor.

To my dismay, one of the combatants, a woman about fifty years of age, heavy of build and highly coloured in complexion, staggered and fell. Her antagonist, a younger and more active woman, was startled and scared at the sudden turn of events. Still unconsciously clutching the handful of hair, she stooped over the body of her prostrate adversary.

' Git up, Doll, git up ! Don'tcher 'ear ! I'm sorry I 'urt yer ! Git up, mate ! ' she tearfully pleaded.

Beyond a few convulsive movements, however, there was no response to her entreaties. Soon she lay perfectly still. The poor creature was quite unconscious. Her chest heaved slightly, and her hands appeared to feel after something to cling to. Blood trickled from her mouth. It was indeed a painful and pitiful sight.

Within five minutes all movement had ceased, and she lay as in the stillness of death.

' I b'lieve she's snuffed it,' said the man who had called me, looking critically upon the body on the ground.

In the meantime I had taken her wrist into my hand and sought the pulse. I could feel no movement at all.

'Yes,' I agreed, 'I'm afraid she's beyond human help.'

Whilst this was going on the usual crowd had gathered, hushed at the tragedy on the pavement.

I sent a man for the doctor, and we awaited his coming.

'It's a fit,' explained one wiseacre.

'She's dropped dahn stone dead!' declared another.

Before long two policemen drew near. Striding through the crowd, and seeing the body on the ground, they looked on silently for a moment, and then began to make inquiries.

I told them all I knew.

'She's snuffed it!' repeated my first informant. 'Oh, yus, she's snuffed it, shore enuf.'

Pulling out a small memorandum book, one of the constables began to make a report, having first sent his colleague for the ambulance.

I reverently placed my pocket handkerchief over the face of the poor creature, and a man standing by chivalrously put his coat on the body.

'That's the woman wot did it,' spoke up my voluble friend.

'Her 'it me fust,' she pleaded.

'You keep your mouth shut,' said the constable sternly, 'and don't move.'

'I didn't intend to 'urt 'er,' she wailed. 'Er's my pal!'

By this time the other constable had returned. Seeing the frightened survivor of the encounter, the older man ordered his mate to take her into custody.

The crowd had greatly increased. A subdued murmur could be heard on all sides. Various theories, explanations, and stories were canvassed by the curious multitude.

Moved by the sadness of the occasion, and by the obvious reverence of the people, as well as by the suddenness of the calamity, I exhorted the crowd to listen to the voice of God, and appealed for serious and sober living. Here, I pointed out, before our very eyes, was an immediate and dire result of alcoholic excess.

Finally, I raised my voice in prayer, commending the poor soul to the tender mercy of God, and entreating that comfort and consolation might be given to those who loved her.

In a few minutes the shrill Klaxon horn of the ambulance announced its approach. The crowd made way for the nurse and the male attendant, who quickly leaped from the vehicle.

The nurse made a superficial examination of the body, and held a brief conference with the other official.

' She's snuffed it ! ' said my friend of the one idea. ' Yes, she's snuffed it, all right.'

The stretcher was brought, upon which the

poor body was to be borne to the ambulance, and duly laid in position.

The nurse took hold of the feet and the man of the shoulders. But the victim must have been quite fifteen to sixteen stones in weight, and they found it difficult to raise such a load. I thereupon lent a hand on one side, and a policeman on the other. Thus the body was placed on the stretcher.

The procession started to the ambulance. The utmost stillness prevailed.

To our surprise we noticed a slight movement beneath my pocket handkerchief. Then followed a lurch of the body. As though they had been shot, the two bearers dropped the stretcher, and the 'dead' woman began to make vigorous endeavours to sit up! A groan went through the multitude! Two women fainted, and required immediate attention.

In the meanwhile Doll had sat up. She looked around incredulously. Her lips moved as though she wanted to speak, but not a sound escaped them. She gazed up at those near her, and then looked farther away! She was completely dumbfounded.

By and by she caught sight of me; then the policemen; and finally the nurse. Soon the meaning of the situation dawned upon her.

Still seated on the stretcher, she let loose such

a torrent of language—strident, sanguineous, indignant—that sent a thrill through every individual in the mob.

'Wot the blinketty, blanketty, blonketty——' There she stopped. Her colour rose so that I trembled for her blood pressure.

Then she started again.

'Wot the plinketty, planketty, plonketty——!' Again she stopped. Her vocabulary couldn't stand the strain of the situation.

We looked on helplessly.

Still again she essayed to find expression for her feelings.

'Wot the winketty ! wanketty ! wonketty——!'

But her progress was arrested. There was clearly no word suited to the occasion.

Finally she struggled to her feet, and, shaking out her garments like a hen shakes its feathers after a tiff with a dog, she caught sight of her quondam antagonist.

'Come along o' me, Mrs. 'Arris,' she said, and, taking her friend's arm, she made a lane through the incredulous crowd.

Suddenly she stopped, and, casting an indignant and defiant glance upon us all, she screamed :

'Cawn't two respectable married women 'ave a few words ? And cawn't a wife an' mother 'ave a fit ?

'Come along o' me, Mrs. 'Arris ! '

And they moved away, arm in arm.

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'Well, that beats me!' said the ambulance man scratching his head.

'I thought she'd snuffed it,' repeated my friend of the fixed idea.

'He! he! he!' giggled a small urchin, standing near, 'it beats Lazarus—it does.'

'Wimmin's queer cattle,' ejaculated one policeman dolefully.

'I think, like old Omar, sir,' said the other man in blue. 'Didn't he say, "God, I thank Thee Thou didst not make me a woman"?'

And we all went our way.

VIII

THE RESURRECTION OF HARRY BOON

O wet red swathe of earth laid bare,
O truth, O strength, O gleaming share,
O patient eyes that watch the goal,
O ploughman of the sinner's soul.
O Jesus, drive the coulter deep
To plough my living man from sleep.

—MASEFIELD : *The Everlasting Mercy.*

Chapter VIII

THE RESURRECTION OF HARRY BOON

MANY years ago, indeed within a few weeks of my arrival in Poplar, I first met Harry Boon. I bless the Providence that first brought us together.

But let me begin at the beginning. I had come to an almost empty church. A faithful but discouraged few feebly carried on a losing fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Empty pews, resounding echoes, and a decaying fabric were my meat and drink. *Ichabod* was plainly written on the walls within and without. The prospect was not exhilarating. It almost made me ill. Like Eliphaz the Temanite, I had a bellyful of east wind !

In this frame of mind, during the first month or two of my Poplar experiences, I walked through roads, and streets, and alleys, to find some point of contact with the people to whom I had been sent. They appeared to be entirely indifferent as to whether I was there or not. In all this tragic multitude was there *one* who really needed me ? Was there one lost sheep I could bring back to the fold ? Suddenly I caught sight of him.

I was walking along one of our most depressing streets. It was near the riverside, and was cursed by the number of public houses that flourished in it. It was a dark and dirty day in November. The usual loungers hung about. Nobody appeared to have anything to do. Out of the murk, some distance ahead of me, I saw a man thrown headlong from a public house. The barman flung him into the gutter like a stone out of a catapult. The poor fellow was drunk. I afterwards discovered that the effect of alcohol upon him was to make him intensely disagreeable. I have no doubt that he had made himself a nuisance—hence his ejection. Still, I could not help reflecting that the stuff which had made him argumentative and unreasonable had been served in that bar, and it was, at least, hard justice to be treated thus.

I assisted the wretched man to his feet, reared him up against the wall, and looked into the eyes of my first wandering sheep—the one whom the Good Shepherd had sent me to find! He was to prove also my first human problem.

I inquired his name, and where he lived. He was half-clad, foul in person, covered with mud, incoherent in speech—and he weighed fifteen stones! He told me that his name was Harry Boon. It took me some time to make out where he lived. When he had somewhat recovered

confidence and steadiness, arm-in-arm we staggered to his door. There I met his wife and his one little girl. The whole story is too sad—and too sacred—to be told in full. But for the encouragement of others certain facts may be set down.

He was the victim of what the doctors call periodic alcoholism. The vicious line of alcoholic taint came through his ancestors and closed in upon him. It was as though some giant snake had him in its coils, and was slowly strangling him. Heredity held him in its terrific grip. This passionate craving for spirits occurred every few weeks. Between the recurring paroxysms he suffered unspeakable misery at the memory of his moral lapses. His resolutions for amendment were of no avail. He thought that Fate was against him. ' The dice was loaded and he hadn't a chance.' Consequently, he sank lower and lower, until the doctor, deprecating any further effort to save him, declared that the wretched victim would be dead within six months.

For nearly seven long years the struggle went on. During his periodic outbursts he consumed three bottles of whisky every day—besides other forms of alcoholic stimulation—all to quench his insatiable thirst. Time after time I stood by him during dreadful attacks of *delirium tremens*. Again and again, in sheer terror of the things he saw

through a diseased and degenerate imagination, he smashed windows and furniture in his home. There was scarcely a sound article of any kind in the house.

But the worst feature of his case was not the physical deterioration. That was bad enough. The moral collapse was worse still. He became crafty, lying, deceitful. He would tell the most appalling untruths without even the flicker of an eyelid ! He would quote scripture, kneel in prayer, pledge his honour—and immediately walk away and commit some dastardly deed of perjury or deceit. He simply could not be trusted to keep his word. He did seem to be a hopeless wreck.

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Time after time I was dismayed to find him drinking, without being able to discover from whom he got the whisky. I had sedulously watched him—for days he would not be out of my sight—and yet mysteriously he was able to keep up the supply. He lied to me, protested that he was not drinking, and declared that my anxieties and suspicions were baseless.

One day I found him in the house alone. His eyes were bloodshot and shifty. I knew he was in the initial stage of a six weeks' attack of alcoholism. He apologized for leaving the room for a minute or two. The minute became an hour. At last, I called out to him. There was no

reply. I went upstairs. He lay on the floor, drunk! But there I saw what I had feared. In a small cupboard were twenty-three bottles of whisky. In his drunken condition he had left the door open.

After a few days he seemed to be better. Then I told him of what I had seen. He was ashamed and aghast that I should have made the discovery.

That evening he, his wife, and I were at the clearance of the whole cupboardful of whisky. I smashed every bottle, and the abominable stuff found its way into the sewer.

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On one occasion, in the course of one of his periodic attacks, I had been staying with him. My object, as usual, was to prevent him taking more alcohol. There were encouraging signs of improvement. He seemed to be coming back to the normal. My duties in other directions required attention, so I asked him to promise not to leave the house during my absence. He gave me his word. In about five hours I returned. His poor wife, distracted and distraught, said he had stolen out of the house, and she had no idea where he was. This was about nine o'clock in the evening. I visited dozens of public houses, but could not find my man. The following day I continued my search, with the same negative result. Four days went by, and there was still

no sight of him. He might have evaporated into thin air !

On the evening of the fourth day, while passing along one of our back streets, much frequented by Chinamen, I heard the sounds of a fight in one of the disreputable hovels. I stood at the door for a moment, and listened. I heard Harry Boon's voice ! He was calling for help. Running in, and up the first flight of stairs, I entered a room. There he was on the floor, with bruised and bleeding face. He was helplessly drunk. It turned out that he had spent the four days drinking in this low-down lodging house. Like the man in the parable, he had been robbed, stripped, wounded, and left half-dead.

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On another occasion, I had gone to bed at the usual hour, and, according to my custom, immediately went to sleep. I awoke to hear the clock striking midnight. As soon as I became wide awake, I was conscious of an inward voice saying, ' Go to Harry Boon ! ' Another voice told me not to become a prey of fancies and hallucinations. My wife suggested that probably I had been dreaming. But no. The voice would not be silenced. I resolved to go. As quickly as possible I dressed, and hurried along the mile and a half of streets that led me to Harry's house. There was a light in the upstairs window. It was now

about one o'clock. I knocked at the door. Screams came from within, and the little girl opened the door. I see her white, agonized face even now.

'Oh, Mr. Lax!' she cried bitterly, 'daddy's killing mummy!'

In a few seconds I was at the bedroom door. Knocking loudly and calling his name, I burst into the room. Poker in hand, the terrified victim of *delirium tremens* was huddled in a corner, his eyes wild and dilated. His poor wife, weeping hysterically at the other end of the room, was calling the little one to her. Soon she clasped her in her arms. The room was a wreck. He had smashed everything in it. Putting the wife and child in a room out of harm's way, I called upon a passing policeman to ask the local doctor to come as soon as he could. I had met him in the house before. A hypodermic injection kept the dangerous dipsomaniac quiet for some hours.

But enough of this tragic story.

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Months and years passed by. Hope alternated with despair. Cowardice counselled letting him go. But I felt sure that the Good Shepherd had sent me after this lost sheep. So the search went on, and hope prevailed.

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Well do I remember a certain day when there

appeared the first gleam of light in the darkness. He was recovering from an unusually bad attack of delirium. His body was enfeebled, his hands tremulous, his mind confused. He sat, a huddled heap, upon a ricketty chair. He pleaded for just one drop of whisky ! It would steady him ! He would soon pull himself together ! But I refused to let him have another drop. Experience had taught me a lesson.

At my wits' end, I wondered what I could do. The case was getting desperate. Suddenly I thought of a lovely village in Derbyshire, among the glorious hills. If I could get him there for a few days, away from the temptations of Poplar, where the fresh air of the uplands might invigorate his body, and the sights of spring purify his mind, it might give him a chance. I suggested it and he was willing to go.

In a day or two we left St. Pancras, and within a few hours were walking among God's green fields, watching the soaring, singing larks, and listening to the sweetest of all earth's music—the music of running streams. All around us were the hills from whence would come our help. We both felt that we had been translated from hell to heaven !

A few days passed. Gradually he became calmer, more intelligent, and his eyes grew human again. In our conversations, for the

hundredth time, I besought him to play the man, to put up an unyielding fight against the devil that was destroying him body and soul. And, of course, I reminded him that ' God is our refuge and strength.'

At that moment W. E. Henley's moving lines came into my mind, and I recited them to him :

> ' It matters not how strait the gate,
> How charged with punishments the scroll,
> I am the master of my fate :
> I am the captain of my soul.'

When I had finished he turned and faced me. How vividly it all comes before me now ! At that moment one of the great main line expresses from London thundered past us in the valley below. We both watched it.

Turning to me with quivering lips, he pointed to the moving train.

' I wish I was under it,' he said, with a groan ; ' life isn't worth living ! '

' Oh, yes, it is ! ' I replied.

' Listen to that verse again,' I continued.

> ' It matters not how strait the gate,
> How charged with punishments the scroll,
> I am the master of my fate :
> I am the captain of my soul.'

Then I observed the first sign of conscious

power for long, weary months. He gripped me by the arm and slowly repeated :

' I am the master of my fate :
I am the captain of my soul.'

' Yes,' he cried, ' and I'll be the captain of my soul ! '

His mouth shut tightly with determination, and tears gushed from his eyes.

' God helping me ! ' he exclaimed, ' I'll not touch another drop of drink ! '

He gripped my hand.

We were standing face to face, looking into each other's eyes.

' Do you mean it ? ' I asked.

' Yes,' he replied, ' I'll be the captain of my soul ! '

' Then let us pray about it,' I suggested.

There and then, on that beautiful hillside, we knelt and prayed. He sought pardon, and found it ; purity, and was cleansed ; strength, and was clothed with power. In that solemn hour God possessed him. Words cannot describe the glory that came over us. We both consecrated ourselves to the service of Christ and the lost sheep. God had strangely used Henley's lines to awaken and quicken his soul.

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He kept his word. Until the day of his death,

twenty years afterwards, he never touched another drop of alcohol. His dedication to total abstinence from intoxicating liquor was absolute. Despair and defeat were past. Victory was complete. He had broken his birth's invidious bar! The terrible entail of heredity was overcome. Henceforth his life was given up to the service of his fellows. He became the helper of the halt, lame, and blind, on the high road of the world. Honours and success followed. His friends were legion.

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When I stood by his open grave, and committed all that was mortal of my friend to mother earth, I saw, as in a vision, the wretched drunkard flung into the gutter, dead in sin—then, after a glorious spiritual resurrection, I gazed upon his new life in Christ.

IX
THE ROMANCE OF THE RIVER

I must down to the seas again, to the lonely sea
and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.

—MASEFIELD : *Salt-water Ballads*—' Sea Fever.'

Chapter IX

THE ROMANCE OF THE RIVER

THE glory of Poplar is the river. The Thames is a river of character, a river of history, a river of life. It is true to-day as in the days of old, 'everything liveth where the river cometh.' Our interests as a community are bound up with it. It surrounds us. We go under it by the Blackwall Tunnel, that miracle of engineering genius, a mile and a quarter from end to end. We cross it by the ferry some distance farther up the stream. But, as you see, we cannot get far away from the river, and live in Poplar.

From its rise in the Cotswold Hills to the estuary where it enters the inevitable sea, the river is full of historic interest. Without straining the imagination one can visualize the ancient Briton paddling his home-made canoe between its rude and rugged shores. We know that the Romans made use of its waters to reach the city of Londinium, even then rising upon its banks. Possibly Julius Cæsar was propelled up the stream in his state-barge when he visited his newly-conquered land. In later times, what

more likely than that William the Conqueror sailed along the chief river of the country he had so long coveted ? Then, when Augustine and his band came to introduce the Christian faith, we may be sure that they did not neglect to use such a ready avenue to the city of their dreams. Such a river, with such a history, may well cast its spell upon us.

Wherever you touch the Thames it is a thing of beauty. In the higher reaches, by Henley, Maidenhead, and Marlow, it is gentle and gracious, and, if you happen to catch it beneath a summer sun, you might imagine it to be a smooth sapphire pavement. It is then that it invites lovers of beauty to find peace upon its placid bosom. In the eloquent words of Sir John Denham, who once addressed his beloved River Thames :

> ' O could I flow with thee, and make thy stream
> My great example, as it is my theme !
> Though deep, yet clear ; though gentle, not too dull ;
> Strong without rage ; without overflowing full.'

You follow it until you reach the great bridges—Westminster Bridge, Blackfriars Bridge, London Bridge, Tower Bridge. You look upon it, a spacious waterway decorating and dignifying those regions of the City made great by historic personages and historic events.

Then you come to its manufactories, sterner

of aspect. Upon either bank you find works and docks and wharves. It is this part in which we are most interested. It is the appeal of our bread and butter. Thousands of our workers find their occupations on the riverside. If work is good, then we are happy. Alas! that so frequently ships are few and work is scarce. Then we tighten our belts.

You are not surprised that, in every mood and under every circumstance, we are proud of our river. For one reason, it links us up with the farthest corners of the earth, and brings the treasures of many lands to our doors. For, be it remembered, the Port of London is the largest port in the world. Every day thousands of men leave us to 'go down to the sea in ships, to do business in great waters.' Tonnage of every kind comes along this stately highway. Into the great, low sheds merchandise of every conceivable and inconceivable sort finds its temporary landing-place, until it is distributed to the millions who inhabit these populous islands.

And what scenes of sorrow and of joy we witness as ships come and go! The falling tear as the ship melts away in the mist on her outward voyage! The wide-extended arms of welcome as friend greets friend when the ship comes home again! With us one hymn is never out of season: 'For those in peril on the sea.'

Another thing I would have you remember. Glorious as is Old Father Thames all along his length of more than two hundred miles, we love to think that he is at his best while he passes our five miles of river-front. For Poplar has the distinction of enjoying the longest river frontage of any borough in London. If you will look at the map, you will see that when the river arrives at Greenwich pool it takes a strong and decided turn to the left. Then it wanders on for over three miles. Sweeping round between the Isle of Dogs and Greenwich, it comes to Limehouse reach, and makes an almost perfect circle. From there it runs once again along the straight. That lovely curve, that gracious sweep, brings poetry into commerce and beauty into business, and, as it were, carries Poplar like a baby in its arms.

I could take you to the Isle of Dogs at 'tide time,' as we call it, when the river has reached that point of brimming fullness, between the flowing and the ebbing tide, which lifts it into glory. From the little garden, planted with trees and flowers by the London County Council, I could show you such a sight as can hardly be seen anywhere else in the world outside Venice itself. It is a veritable oasis. For immediately in front of you, so near that you could throw a stone on deck, there sails a stately liner, or perhaps a fussy little tug busily leads a convoy of laden barges.

Better still, some Thames lighter with drooping red-brown sail is slowly dropping down the stream, so reminiscent of the craft on the Venetian canals. Then, if by good fortune it be at the time of the setting sun, you see on the other side of the river Wren's masterpiece of architecture, the Royal Naval College, with its towers and pinnacles backed by the greenery of Greenwich Park and the domes of the Observatory, all gently touched with the golden sunset glow. Behind it all there stand the green-clad hills of Kent in the distant background. This pretty spot was the site of the former Horse Ferry, described by Pepys, who was delayed by the tide there for three hours on one occasion, as 'the unlucky Isle of Dogs, a chill place.'

How often have I walked by the riverside of an evening beneath a waning moon. At that hour, and under such conditions, everything is softened into tender beauty. Even long-armed derricks standing athwart the wharves wear a ghostly charm. Above all, there is a divine stillness. The musical movement of the water murmurs messages which cannot be heard during the din of the day. The voices of the Thames police, as they pull their boat on patrol, are toned down to a low key. The soft cadences of a song by some lighterman as he passes, guiding his cumbrous craft, takes your mind to the Grand

Canal at Venice, or to some lovely Norwegian fjord.

Let us go a little further back—no further than many still living can call to mind—when Poplar was the proud leader of the world in the building of ships. Before the Clyde, the Tyne, or the Tees were thought of as centres of shipbuilding, Poplar built for all the world. First, ships of war, those famous wooden walls of England. Then those brilliant, fast-sailing clippers that brought tea from India, wool from Australia, and the treasures of the Orient from wherever they could be found. Ah ! those greyhounds of the sea were the pride of our architects and shipwrights ! In course of time, iron and steel became the fashion. Battleships and cruisers, torpedo-boats and submarines, were built upon our river, and went forth to protect honest shipping on all the seven seas, and to foster the spirit of unity in our far-flung Empire. Here the *Great Eastern* was built. In that day a very mammoth she was thought to be. And what of the great liners that did so much in those early days to open up the world and to bring the peoples of the earth nearer together ? Ah, yes, we are proud of the liners of the Thames. ' The liner, she's a lady.' Those were the days of our greatest fame and prosperity. Alas ! for the chances and changes of mortal things.

But come to the Docks. See there! that grey-hulled fine-lined ship is from the east and south of Africa. That other ship painted black, with the red funnel, is from Australia, and the one beyond hails from South America. The world is at our doorstep. Others there are which, if they could speak, would tell of strange lands and stranger peoples, of new worlds for old. Our great-grandfathers used to talk of the dividing seas, and were fearful of venturing far. Only the Drakes and Cooks and Frobishers explored the unknown seas. Now we greet the oceans as links between continent and continent, between island and island, tending more and more to unite the world in a grand confederation of peace.

Come into the great sheds. Close your eyes! Sniff the air! Inhale 'the spicy breezes' that 'blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle.' Inhale again! Don't you taste molasses from the West Indies? Coffee from South America? Tea from India? There is the fruit of the palm from West Africa. Yonder is the spoil of every kind from the islands of the Southern Seas. Yes, the whole world is laid under contribution, and it is Poplar that opens its doors to welcome all to England.

But did you hear that once—I think only once—the river brought us pain and distress? It arose in its stupendous fullness and overflowed its banks. Like a giant let loose, it brought ruin

and devastation to thousands of homes. A great tidal wave swept upstream. It was in the middle of the night. Thousands were caught unawares. Some who slept in cellars and basements were swiftly submerged and drowned. All the river-side dwellers suffered. Houses were inundated. Homes were ruined. Unspeakable filth was deposited upon carpets, furniture, and household gods. To this day houses carry the mark—the tide-line—three, four, even five feet high. At length the river, as though ashamed of itself, went back to its normal level. The memory of that dreadful visitation—for in Poplar alone over eleven hundred homes were ruined—was made tolerable by the gay courage, the triumphant laughter, and the patient endurance of the greatest sufferers. No wonder the river breeds big characters! For after all, while our environment has something to do in the shaping of a man, it is the glory of man that he shapes his environment.

Yes, there is high romance in our glorious river. Amid much of sadness and sordidness, even misery in human experience, we can never be wholly mean or commonplace while Providence places us alongside such a fount of uplifting thought as a great river.

Alas, for an even darker side to my story. Scarcely a day passes but some poor body is

washed ashore along the stretch of river front that belongs to us. In want, in fear, and in loneliness, some desperate spirit is broken. In mad despair a final leap is taken into the dark waters. And the river flows on.

X
SAMPLES FROM THE BULK

Yes, this is a field, and these be flowers that I see! Pluck not these, Brother, which have but one limb to hold up heads to the light.

Give them thy hand, Brother, give them thy hand!

HOUSMAN: *Little Plays of St. Francis.*

Chapter X

SAMPLES FROM THE BULK

'IT takes all sorts to make a world, I suppose,' remarked my neighbour one day, as he ruefully recounted a rather desperate piece of perfidy of which some man had been guilty.

'Yes,' I agreed.

When he had finished the first story, another occurred to him, and, filled with indignation and disgust, he poured out his tale of falsity and dishonour. With an eloquent gesture, he spat into the roadway, declaring that the average man was worth no more than that!

'There I differ from you,' I replied. 'I admit that there are bad men and women in the world—"rotters," as you call them—but my experience teaches me that there are fewer essentially bad people about than one might expect. My trouble is not with the bad people, but with the silly, the stupid, and the ignorant, who are always getting into trouble through their folly.

'On the contrary,' I continued, 'I am amazed at the rich inheritance of character that we have in the world. I am constantly coming across

acts of generous love and loyalty that take me by surprise. Knowing something of a man's history or a woman's environment, I naturally do not expect great things. Then, suddenly, in the mud that abounds along the roadway of life, I find a gem that I did not expect to see. The rich vein of gold in human nature is wonderful. The strain of faith is partly hidden during the ordinary business of the day. Such people would blush to be called "religious." But when the deep affairs of life and death are faced, God has a way of revealing Himself.

'Yes,' I went on, 'life is a mixture—there are the good and the bad—and if it were not for the good, life would be intolerable. But God has His "salt" plentifully scattered in the world and that keeps it sweet.'

. . . . . .

I had a friend, whose modesty led to considerable misunderstanding. He was an almost perfect example of anonymous goodness. His left hand never knew what his right hand was doing. He literally did good by stealth. He never married. It was rumoured that the one whom he loved had married another. In any case, he lived alone, and lived quietly. His money was spent carefully—indeed, parsimoniously. He was an abstainer from alcoholic liquor, did not smoke,

and apparently spent little or nothing upon himself. Even his dress was always a little threadbare.

Such a man is peculiarly liable to be misunderstood. He was an active Church member, and none doubted his absolute integrity. But somehow we all regarded him with some suspicion. We thought him stingy. Indeed, some openly declared him to be a miser, piling up money.

How often I heard sneering remarks concerning him. If appreciative words were spoken, it was generally with the modifying qualification that, ' it was a pity he was so mean ! '

One man, Mr. X by name, particularly loathed him, and never missed an opportunity of defaming his character. Envy and jealousy possessed him. In public and in private he slandered him. Frequently I warned him that he rendered himself liable to an action for defamation of character.

In course of time, business misfortunes overtook Mr. X. Depression in industry led to unemployment and loss. Acute suffering followed. He had a wife and four children. It was pitiable to see them reduced to positive privation. Eventually, at my own suggestion, he applied for relief to the Guardians ! This was the lowest depth of humiliation. His pride was sorely wounded.

One day my friend, whom every one thought to

be so mean, came to see me. It was difficult for him to explain his errand. After a few minutes he shyly revealed the reason for the call. He was sorry to see Mr. X and his family in such straits—would I, please, pass on this sum of money to him in such amounts as I thought advisable ? But he insisted that on no account—on no account, he repeated—must any living soul know of it. He then handed me fifty pounds in banknotes.

Knowing the circumstances, I was staggered. I protested that this was a large sum. But quietly he insisted, remarking that, while he was not a rich man, he could not be happy in possessing money while others were in need.

I took ten pounds to Mr. X, who received it gladly. He naturally wished to know the name of his benefactor. I, of course, could not tell him. He was elated at his good fortune, and begged me to reveal the name of the generous donor. Then his obsession obtruded itself. Pointing in the direction in which the kind donor of the money lived, his lips curled with contempt, and he remarked that, at any rate, that mean skunk would not show such generosity !

Each time I visited him for the purpose of leaving more of the money, the same bitterness and hostility were in evidence. Never was my patience more tried, and never did I find it more difficult to keep a promise honourably. I wanted

to shame Mr. X's churlishness and envy, but was in honour bound to keep the secret.

Time went on. Adversity dogged Mr. X. (I am bound to say that, somehow, I could not divest my mind of the conviction that in all his adversity there was an element of retribution!) His pain became the more acute for the reason that his children could not have the education he desired. In the case of one child that was particularly distressing. She was brilliant, and it seemed as though she would never have her opportunity. My anonymous friend found the money, and eventually the girl took a London degree! Through it all, I acted as almoner, on the same condition of anonymity. Mr. X to this day does not know that he has slandered his best friend!

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The next hero to whom I wish to do honour was a London bus-driver. He spent his life in driving one of those splendid omnibuses—the gondolas of London—from West to East and from East to West. From day to day I would see him behind the driving-wheel of the bus, and we always shouted a greeting as we passed along. On his off-Sunday he found his place in the House of God.

There was little of the heroic in his appearance. He was small in stature, and tubby in figure. I suppose it would have been difficult to find a

more commonplace-looking individual than Ben Moss. But beneath that plain, unattractive exterior there burned a rare flame of courage and resource.

One day he was driving his bus along the crowded Commercial Road, in the direction of the Bank. The traffic, as usual, streamed like a torrent along that great highway. Suddenly the loud clatter of horses' hoofs and the rattle of heavy wheels attracted his attention. Two great horses, harnessed to a lorry, had taken fright, and were thundering along. Men's faces were blanched and women screamed. A policeman, in trying to stop the maddened beasts, was trodden upon and killed. Injury and death to others seemed imminent.

Calmly piloting his bus to the side of the road, and looking behind to see what was happening, Ben saw the animals approaching. Applying his brake, he waited. The beasts were swerving towards the bus—in panic some leapt from the top, and all were in terror ! As they passed within a few inches of his bus, Ben jumped upon the lorry. Climbing over the driver's seat, he crept along the pole between the frightened beasts, and, gripping their halters with all his might, pulled them up. When they stopped he calmly patted them on the backs ! The police complimented him upon his noble action.

Within a few minutes that obscure hero was piloting his bus along the great Commercial Road!

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I think of another friend, whose courage and self-sacrifice could only have had their inspiration in Christ. Religion was the dominating influence in his life. His principles added zest and keenness to his mind, and clearness to his moral vision.

He served his apprenticeship in the City. In early manhood he invented some contrivance of vital importance to the industry with which he was associated. Commercial success followed. His father was dead, and, of course, he provided for his mother.

There was, however, one bitter drop in his cup of success. His mother was an inveterate drunkard. How often have I seen her rolling along the street, hilariously drunk! He made a place for her in his beautiful home, for he had removed to one of the suburbs. But she left it, preferring to make her home in a hovel. Her language was foul and her person filthy.

To the wonder and admiration of everybody, my friend never gave her up. He would bring her out of the public houses, taking her arm, and helping her home when she could not walk alone. For years this patient, loving devotion was maintained.

At last she died. Alcoholic poisoning was the ultimate cause of her death.

I stood by my friend's side when the poor degraded body was laid to rest. I raise my hat in admiration of such love and courage, although those gracious virtues seemed in vain.

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Mrs. Briggs was an old woman who suffered from the most serious limitations that human nature could be expected to bear. She was a widow, in poor health. Her age about eighty years. Her income a few shillings a week, received from ' the Parish.' Her home in a noisy street, made almost unbearable by wild, destructive children in the day, and by cats at night. Near by was a great chemical factory that belched the most noisome, stinking odours into the air. Eyes and nostrils vainly protested. Neither tree nor flower could live in that horrible atmosphere. Little wonder if she had been full of complaints.

But no, the patience and courage of that dear old soul were beyond words. Never a murmur escaped her lips ; indeed she had rarely anything but the most abounding sense of joy in life. The fact was, she lived in an enchanted world. It was God's world ! Her eyes were filled with beauty, and so everything around her was lovely.

One day she showed me a bright spot in the bilious-grey walls of the houses on the opposite

side of the street. The spot of light was like a diamond stuck in the wall. She did not know what it was, but had noticed that it was only bright when the sun shone. I investigated, and found it to be a piece of glass that had got mixed with the mortar in the building of the houses. The effect of the sun shining upon it was to make it as dazzling as a diamond.

'That's Amelia Briggs,' she said with a smiling face, 'when God shines on me.'

Over her mantel she had some lines which I always read.

> When you go to bed with a weary head,
> 'Tis a splendid plan, if you only can,
> To leave all your cares at the foot of the stairs:
> You'll shoulder them better by morning light,
> But most will have melted away in the night.

'Am I lonely? Why should I be?' she said. 'Have I not my cat—and God?'

XI
THE MEDICINE MAN

I do remember an apothecary . .

—SHAKESPEARE : *Romeo and Juliet.*

Chapter XI

THE MEDICINE MAN

MR. HITCHING overflowed with benevolence. His face beamed with joy, while his hands genuflected benedictions. He was literally the friend of all and the enemy of none. Not a dog in the street but would lick his hand, and never a cat but would arch its back and rub itself against his seedy trousers. He was the incarnation of the milk of human kindness.

We always called him *Mr.* Hitching. I don't know why, except that there was a professional air about him. By nature he was decorous and courteous. Long after the silk hat as a head covering had suffered eclipse, he continued to wear it. Much brushing had worn it thin, and it seemed to plead pathetically to be sent to the place where good old hats find rest. Still it faithfully did its duty, in spite of senility and decay. The fact was that the milk of kindness within, and the silk of respectability without, made up the person of Mr. Hitching.

Mr. Hitching was a small, stoutish man, somewhat fussy, and extraordinarily active. His

movements suggested rolling rather than walking, as though he were trying to be everywhere at one and the same time. He seemed to descend suddenly from the void. The appeal of Christ had been powerful. As if by inspiration he had accepted the obligations, duties, and joys of religion, and quickly became one of us.

Now Mr. Hitching had a history. He was a bachelor, and lived in one room. His modesty forbade him to invite any one to the narrow quarters in which he spent his days. If I called to see him the door was invariably locked. Much battering elicited no response. But I was certain that he lived there. The people in the house declared that they occasionally saw him coming and going.

How Mr. Hitching earned a living none really knew. Some said he was a commercial traveller. Others thought he was something in the City. One even suggested that he was a burglar. The black bag that he carried looked rather suspicious ! This last suggestion was, of course, out of the question. He was too kind, too genial, too generous, for such a dour and secretive business as burglary. Whatever else he might be, that was obviously impossible.

Out of all the mystery of Mr. Hitching's life amongst us, one thing, at least, emerged. He knew something about medicines. He talked

drugs, discussed acids, and discoursed on alkalies. He was familiar with every formula in the British Pharmacopœia. He proudly and confidently asserted that for every ill that flesh is heir to, God, in His wisdom, had provided a remedy. Christ had redeemed men's bodies as well as their souls. It was man's greatest privilege to hasten the time when disease and pain should be mastered and annihilated. It appeared, therefore, that in the evolution of his mentality he was an unfinished doctor. Medical jargon tripped lightly from his lips, although his pronunciation was not above suspicion. He was thrilled at the opportunity of giving medical advice. So he came to be called the Medicine Man.

Now, this obsession of Mr. Hitching's had its difficulties. He constituted himself the custodian of his friends' health. If they were well, and said so, he was disappointed. If they were out of sorts he brightened up. If influenza threatened he became really cheerful. If, by any misfortune, a critical illness seemed likely, he expanded with pleasure, and expatiated on the microbes, phagocytes, and leucocytes. To facilitate his usefulness to his friends, he carried about his person small phials containing pills and powders and potions. For this purpose he had pockets tailored into every garment he wore. These pockets were made just the size to fit the particular

phial concerned. The pills or tablets in these little receptacles were of various colours and shapes. So it was the simplest thing in the world to him, to make a hasty diagnosis of the complaint menacing the sufferer, and then to prescribe the pill or tablet of the proper colour and shape.

Alas ! my chief difficulty lay in his affection for his minister. As he explained with enthusiasm, he had received so much—indeed he owed to me 'his own soul also.' Consequently, whatever he did was but a poor return, and he was for ever seeking opportunities of doing service to pay the debt he owed. So his devotion became embarrassing, his attentions disconcerting, and his fussiness a nuisance. How often have I tried, by tactful suggestion, to abate his zeal, or appeared to be preoccupied when his anxiety proved aggressive ! Now and again, I fear, I spoke sharply to him. Then he would go away crushed and crestfallen, until I relented. Lest he should become a castaway—and I dreaded that—I declared that I would allow him to take my temperature every hour of the day, and swallow all the pills ever made ! Perhaps that was the price of his salvation. In this way I made the best of the situation.

As the days and months went on I settled down to the watchful attentions of my physician-in-ordinary. No Royal personage ever had more

constant oversight than I. With the eye of the lynx, Mr. Hitching noted every change in manner or movement. Any sign of fatigue threw him into spasms of apprehension. If I exhibited abandon or passion in the pulpit it produced in him acute agony of mind, and after the service he would wait at the vestry door to see if I was able to walk home.

'Yer doin' too much, sir,' he would say in a tone of real alarm, at the same time slipping his arm into mine.

'Now just take this pill—it's a white 'un this time—an' yer'll soon be all right,' he would say.

So the pill duly went on its way rejoicing, and, upon reaching my door, Mr. Hitching ran and rolled his happy way home.

Sunday was, as may be imagined, Mr. Hitching's great day. He could see his patient as he went his way into the vestry, could gaze upon him as he stood in the pulpit, and, whatever the weather, could wait outside after the service, for a speedy diagnosis, and, according to the need, a pill of some kind or colour could be administered.

He was, however, by no means negligent of his opportunities during the week. He sought me here and there, and, according to announcement, knew where my pastoral visitation would take me. Standing at the end of a street, he would

espy me in the distance, and instantly make a bee-line in my direction. Seeing him, I would dodge down some side street, lose myself in some devious passages or alleys, or perhaps suddenly disappear into some house! There he would patiently await my departure, and—unless, as sometimes happened, I escaped by climbing over some backyard wall—I had again to face the music of his loving and critical questions.

His ingenuity found expression in numerous ways. Sometimes his manœuvres ended ludicrously.

On one occasion I was conducting a Special Mission in Poplar. It was an exhausting affair, involving two services a day for a fortnight.

At the end of the first week I suppose my appearance suggested fatigue. Mr. Hitching looked worried. He always sat in the pew nearest the pulpit, and critically watched the preacher. As the services proceeded he became more and more anxious. By a kind of lip language he would endeavour to pass on advice whilst a hymn was being sung.

When I entered the pulpit one evening, I found a note on the small table, and a box of pills! The note besought me to take two tonic pills at the commencement of each service. Of course, they were from Mr. Hitching.

I was approaching the end of the sermon. The

tense feeling in the congregation was encouraging. In the midst of my final appeal, by way of illustration, I hastily picked up the paper from the table, and held it aloft. With the paper came the box of pills ! Alas ! for the solemnity of the occasion. A shower of pills scattered over the congregation ! Dodging heads tried to escape the fusillade. Smiles followed. Mr. Hitching's face was a picture. He hurried home immediately.

The crisis came most unexpectedly. At three o'clock one Monday morning we were awakened by the loud insistent ringing of the front door bell. It was winter, and very cold. For a minute or two, cowardice won, and I lay still between the warm blankets, hoping that the caller would be discouraged and leave me in peace. It was not to be. The ringing increased in vigour, and the clatter was reinforced by a wild tattoo on the door-knocker.

Driven to desperation, I leaped out of bed.

Throwing open the window, I looked out to inquire what was the matter. There stood Mr. Hitching.

' Is that yer, sir ? ' he called out, as in agony.

' Yes,' I replied, ' whatever is the matter ? Is somebody ill ? '

' 'Ow do *yer* feel, sir ? ' he cried, ignoring my question.

' Very well, thank you,' I said, with but little grace.

'Thank God yer alive, sir!' he shouted. 'I thought yer would be dead!'

'Dead! Dead! What for?' I asked, in amazement.

'I'm sorry, sir,' he explained, with grateful voice, 'I thought I 'ad made a mistake last night when I give yer the pill—I thought I 'ad given yer a yeller 'un, which is for poisoning cats and dogs! Thank the Lord, it were a brown 'un after all!'

And away he ran home.

Of course, this greatly upset my poor distracted wife, who declared that she would prohibit my taking any more of Mr. Hitching's wretched pills.

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I must bring the curtain down upon my many adventures with my poor eccentric friend. To the end he continued his watchful attentions. Prohibitions were ignored. Threats were cast aside. Excommunications—bell, book, and candle—were all of no avail. The ruling passion was strong even in death.

One day he did not leave his lonely room. The next day nobody saw him. Several days passed and the silence was unbroken. The police were informed. They forced the door and entered the dismal apartment. They found Mr. Hitching dead in bed.

The *post mortem* was duly made, and the

inquest held. He was found to have died of arsenical poisoning. The circumstances of his peculiar mania were explained, and an open verdict returned.

I do not for a moment believe that my poor friend committed suicide. I give it as my opinion that he had inadvertently taken one of his own pills containing poison. Was it Nemesis—or, was it Destiny ?

Alas ! for Mr. Hitching.

XII

BUY! BUY!! BUY!!!

All day long the traffic goes
In Lady Street by dingy rows . . .
. . . His stall
Of many-coloured merchandise
He makes a shining paradise.

—DRINKWATER.

Chapter XII

BUY! BUY!! BUY!!!

'WHOA! Wot'cher doin? Go easy, there! Don't push the blinkin' stall over! Buy! Buy!! Buy!!! This is the place to buy sun-kissed oranges, moon-kissed apples, and star-kissed bananas! Every bloomin' bit o' fruit on this 'ere stall 'as bin kissed by somethin' or somebody! Buy! Buy!! Buy!!!'

Here we are in Chrisp Street Market, and the costermonger whose strident voice you hear is Joe Jaggers. He is one of our 'characters.'

Chrisp Street is the hub of our Poplar universe. Around this centre the wheel of our life revolves. It is a long, narrow, unlovely street, drawn out, as it were, like a string of chewing-gum, for nearly half a mile. It is twin brother to Petticoat Lane in Whitechapel. Shops stand side by side along its length. In addition, stalls are set in front of the shops, ranged on the edge of the pavement. To this open-air emporium we all converge to buy or sell. Here you will find the most indiscriminate medley of wares. The riches of the Orient are flung among the treasures of manufacturing Manchester. A row of pins or

a suit of clothes ; a bath, a bun, or a bird ; a rocking-horse or a piano. A tuppenny meat pie or a carpenter's outfit. Things new and old, things beautiful and ugly, things honestly come by and—otherwise.

Your domestic wants are also met. Fruit from Covent Garden, potatoes from Spitalfields, meat from Smithfield. The market says, ' If you don't see it in the window, ask for it ! ' Assuredly it *is* there somewhere. Yes, Chrisp Street Market is a wonderful place.

But the glory of Chrisp Street is its human material. Costers, hawkers, touts, beggars, buyers and sellers, Jew and Gentile, black, white, and yellow, thieves and honest men—all hilarious, voluble, pushing, jostling, wrestling, resisting !

Already you hear the deep murmur of the seething multitude. The loud staccato of some shrill-voiced coster strikes the ear like an *obbligato* movement in some sonorous chorus. The prevailing cry may be interpreted, ' It's your money we want ! ' ' It's your money we want ! '

It is a crowd of poor folk. Women and children predominate. Men are mostly lounging and looking on. The familiar bag is in most hands. Fish, vegetables, groceries, odds and ends, are all jumbled together indiscriminately. The women look tired and weary. Their pale, anxious faces tell the tale of poverty. They are looking for the

cheapest article, and haggling over every ha'penny. Children hang on to their skirts.

Let us walk through the market. Our pace will be slow, for the human tide has strongly set in.

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Here is Len, the butcher. He is red of face, portly of figure, voluble of speech. His assistant, Horace, hears constant adjurations to increased vigour of movement. His potential customers, passing by, hear the familiar greeting: 'Buy ! Buy ! ! Buy ! ! ! '

'Wot did yer say yer wanted, ma ? A leg o' lamb ? Then a leg o' lamb yer shall 'ave ! A nice 'un this is ! This 'ere lamb, pore dear, was reared by Lord Salisbury—fed wiv 'is own 'and, it was ! It *was* a beauty, it was !

'Nah, 'Orace, wrap up the lady's leg: 'er 'usband'll 'ave a good dinner o' Sunday, 'e will !

'Yus, ma ! that's right ! Sold agen an' got the money !

'Yus, m'dear, it's liver yer want ? Yer muvver says wot ? Tender liver ? 'Orace, where are yer ? Weigh a pound o' tender liver for this little gel !—a pound o' nice tender liver !

'That's right, 'Orace ; weigh the little girl's tender liver !

'Tenpence to yer, m'dear ! Sold agen an' got the money !

'Oh, yus ! Oh, yus ! This is the place for meat !

'Wot did yer say yer wanted, sir? A pound o' beefsteak? Yus, sir, an' yer not only wants it—yer needs it, by the look o' yer!

'Where are yer, 'Orace? Yer allus where yer oughtn't to be!

'Giv' the genelman a pound o' juicy steak, an' smile at it.

''Ere yer are, sir; get this into yer innards—an' smile, smile, smile!

'Sold agen an' got the money! Buy! Buy!! Buy!!!'

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'Hello, Mrs. Button, is that you? How are you? And how is Babs?' I inquire.

'I'm very poorly, sir, and Babs is wuss,' replies the seedy little woman.

'Oh, dear, I'm sorry to hear it; what's the matter with her?'

'Why, the doctor says she's got the 'umps.'

'Then she must be bad! Poor little thing. So long, Mrs. Button. Cheerio!'

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We move on.

'Look at this man! What is he selling?'

He says he comes all the way from New Zealand. He is selling some contraption for the quick adjustment of collar and tie. He has a tray in front of him, fixed upon a tripod. On the tray are a number of his patent contrivances. His

wife stands near, ready to mix with the crowd and exchange the patent collar and tie adjuster for the nimble sixpence demanded.

'Now, gentlemen, I hold in my hand a commodity you all need. You busy men need it, to get off quick to work in the morning ; you young men, whose fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love, need it ! You smart men, who must be well groomed, need it ! You all need it !

'See, gentlemen, how easily it is done ! ' (He puts on his collar, aided by his patent.) 'So—and so—and—so——! There it is, and you are dressed for the day ! All in ten seconds !

'It is used by the nobility and gentry all over the world. All for sixpence ! And, ladies and gentlemen, I beg to inform you that all the proceeds from the sale of this wonderful adjuster go to a widow and orphan !—to those who need it so sorely !—and, ladies and gents, my wife is the widow and I am the orphan ! Now, my dear, get among 'em, and let 'em have the fruits of my genius ! Only a tanner ! Now's your chance ! '

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Here is the quack. A table covered with many-coloured bottles forms his principal stock-in-trade. He is glib of tongue, aggressive, ingratiating. His hair is dyed a vicious black, large brown goggles hide his eyes, some sort of gown hangs from his shoulders. A big banner is suspended

behind him, which proclaims that his name is Professor Silvanus. A Union Jack flies from a pole fixed to his motor-car.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he says, as we draw near. 'You all know me. I am Silvanus. I have been comin' to Poplar for twenty years. My grateful patients are like the sands on the seashore for number. Many of 'em are livin' testimonials of my skill. I've cured more people than all the 'ospitals in London put together. What do I cure? I'm an expert in all diseases of the stomach and liver. Put the stomach an' liver right, an' all's right with the world ! But if the stomach an' liver is wrong—then the devil 'as got you !

'Ladies and gents, how's your stomach ? Do you look at your tongue in a mornin' ? How's your liver ? If all is wrong with you, come to Silvanus ! I'll cure you in an hour ! Come to me for pain-across-the-small-of-the-back-caused-by-gravelly-matter-lodging-in-the-kidneys-shootin'-pains-across-the-shoulder-blades-and sick-headache ! ' (This he declaims with terrific speed and emphasis.)

'No more pain ! No more sufferin' ! I can see some of you 'ave got the devil in your liver. Get the devil out, an' you'll be all right. What is my medicine made of ? Ah ! that is my secret. I'll tell you. Every year I takes a trip to Mexico. Away over the Andes Mountains I knows a place

where a precious 'erb grows. I engages a little army o' Mexicans to gather this life-givin' 'erb. Nobody else knows about it ! It's my own secret. You see this bottle, with the bright pink colour ? That's the secret remedy. An' I've brought it 'ere to Poplar to cure all of you who've got the devil in your innards.

' What's my charge ? Half a crown ? No ! Two shillins' ? No ! Eighteenpence ? No ! My charge to you is—one shillin' ! A shillin', ladies and gents, to get the devil out o' your innards ! It would be cheap at five pound !

' Now, George, pass the bottles round to the intelligent sufferin' poor o' Poplar !

' Does anybody want my advice about their 'ealth ? Now's your chance ! No charge ! Advice free, gratis, and for nothin' !

' Want to speak to me, lady ? Certainly. What is it ?

' Your 'usband is ill ? 'Ave you 'ad 'im at the doctor's ? Of course, none of 'em ever does anybody any good. Of course not.

' What's the matter ? What d'yer say ? Heart bad, liver wrong, kidneys diseased ? Diabetes ?

' Yus, I can see 'e's pretty bad, pore devil ! Can I do anythin' for 'im ? Of course I can ! I'll tell you what to do : take this powder—give it to 'im next Thursday mornin' ; it'll give 'im fits—then bring 'im to me on the Friday—I can cure the fits !

' Any other questions ?

' That's right, George ! All the bottles gone ! An' so to bed ! '

The crowd is enormous. Old and young stand gaping at the quack's boundless confidence, fascinated by his unscrupulous greed. But he rakes in the shillings !

. . . . . .

Come along. A plaintive voice wails a well-known hymn. It is old blind Jimmy. He holds a tin cup in front of him. His wife turns the handle of a wheezy hurdy-gurdy. Together they groan :

When peace, like a river——

. . . . . .

Ah, look here ! This is Professor Bumps, the phrenologist. He stands on a high platform. His long, pale ascetic face, surmounted by the large dome of his bald head, makes him the typical ' Professor of Phrenology,' by which title he styles himself. A human skull grins at the crowd, and an earthenware head, marked in squares, gives the necessary atmosphere for the lectures to ' the cultured citizens of Poplar.'

A row of five or six subjects for free phrenological examination sit side by side. The professor has reached the fourth in the row. This is a man about forty years old. The lecturer is looking intently into the face of his subject, whilst one hand runs rapidly over his head.

' Here, ladies and gentlemen, is a man who ought to make his mark as a musician. I never saw such a musical head ! Without using the language of exaggeration, I deliberately declare that he is of the class of Mendelssohn and Beethoven. He has a wonderful creative gift. He is full of music—full of it, brimming over with it ! '

' Yus, guv'nor, yer right there ! ' says the musical genius.

' Certainly, sir. I knew I was ! The gent says I'm correct,' exclaims the professor.

' Yus, yer correct, I'm full o' music—must be—'cos none's come aht yet ! '

At which the crowd laughs and jeers, and the professor turns to the next subject in the row.

This is one of our well-known ne'er-do-wells. Unkempt and dissipated, he spends his days seeking work—which he never finds. An inane grin pervades his face while the light fingers of the professor glide through his tousled hair.

' Here's a head for you—a head to be proud of ! ' cries the lecturer.

The subject sniggers and sits tight.

' You ought to have been Prime Minister, sir ! *Stanley Baldwin indeed.*' (This with contempt.) ' Look at this head, ladies and gentlemen !—gaze into this face ! They belong to the rare race of genius !

' What do you do for a living, sir ? What ?

Holds horses' heads? You ought to be ruling an empire, sir! You're a £5,000 a year man! The pore never get a chance!'

The subject looks up sheepishly.

'Can yer lend us a tanner, mate? I'll pay yer back when I gets my £5,000 a year.'

'Were you addressing some observation to me, sir?' says the professor.

And so he passes on to the next.

. . . . . .

'Hi, sir! Just a word!' It is Billy Jenkins, an old friend.

'Yes, Billy,' I reply.

'When next yer call to see me, please don't forget that I've changed my address,' says Billy.

'Oh!' I exclaim.

'Yus!' he replies. 'I've done very well. I've got a drawrin'-room, a dinin'-room, a mornin'-room, a kitchen, a wine-cellar—yus, I've done very well!'

'When did you move, Billy, and where have you gone?' I inquire.

'I flitted to-day,' he replied. 'It didn't need no pantechnicon—I just carried everythin' under my arm.

'Yus,' he goes on. 'I've got a corner in a friend's room. When I moves my 'and *this* way it's a drawrin'-room; when I moves my 'and *that* way, it's a dinin'-room; when I moves it *up*,

it's a kitchen ; when I moves it *dahn*, it's a wine-cellar ! '

' Oh ! ' I gasp.

' Yus ! ' he goes on triumphantly. ' When I drinks deep and shuts my eyes, it's whisky ; when I just sips and keeps my eyes open, it's ginger-beer ? See ?

' So long, sir ! '

. . . . . .

Ah, here's Flannery, the corn conqueror. We must stop and listen to him. Flannery is an Irishman from Dublin. He has kissed the blarney stone. Moreover, he has discovered ' the most remarkable cure for corns the world has ever seen.'

' Ye ses, who are ye ? I ses I'm the famous Flannery, the Conqueror o' Corns, the Vanquisher o' Warts and the Banisher o' Bunions ! I'm yer best friend ! I helps ye to walk by clearin' yer feet o' corns, warts, and bunions ! Ye walks to heaven or hell ! I helps ye to walk in comfort to either place !

' Have ye a corn ? Are ye tormented wi' a bunion ? Then, put yer feet i' Flannery's 'ands ! Like a wizard I gives ye new feet—feet as soft an' smooth as a little child's ! Yis, ladies and genelmen, I'm yer best friend.

' The King is my friend, too ! Hats off, genelmen, for the King ! Gawd bless 'im !

'I sees 'im one day limpin' along.

'"Yer Majesty's limpin', sure," ses I; "Yer bad on yer feet, bedad!" ses I, "though 'tis better to be weak at that end than the other," ses I.

'"Yer Majesty's got a corn," ses I.

'"Yis, Flannery," ses he, "I have!" And he looked sorry for hisself, he did!

'"I'll cure the corn, yer Majesty," ses I.

'So I applied this very ointment I'm now offerin' to ye. The King sat down, he did! I did the trick. What did I do? Why, I rubbed in the ointment an' then I pulled out the corn by the 'air of its 'ead, ladies and gents. In twenty minutes the King and Flannery were waltzing round a ring! Yis, the King's a friend o' mine!

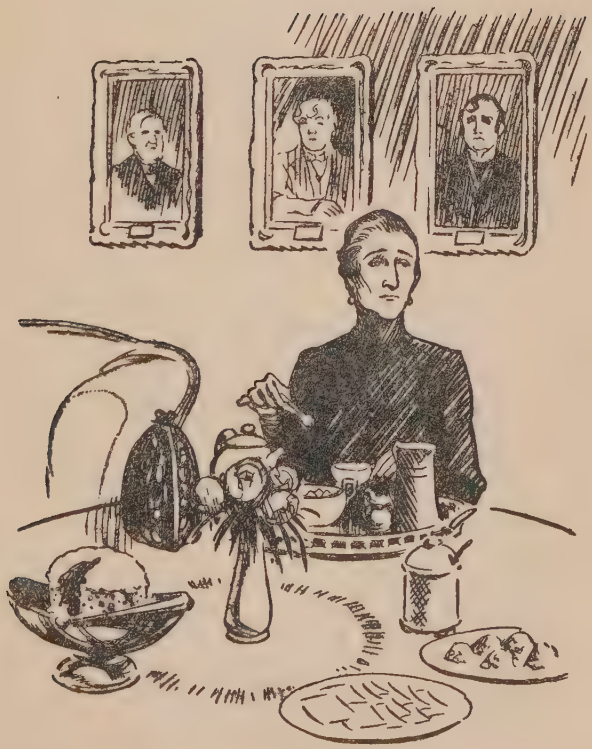
'What am I chargin'? Ye might expect my price would be a pound a box fer sich wonderful ointment—this royal ointment! But no, I'm yer friend as well as the King's! My price to ye is thrippence a box! Who'll 'ave a box? Who'll 'ave a box? No more corns, warts, or bunions, aches, pains, or firecracks!'

. . . . . .

'Must you go? Well, we can come again some other time, and see the strange scenes and stranger people of Chrisp Street Market, Poplar.

'Good-bye! Good-bye!'

XIII
THE LION TAMER



Let men say what they will,
Woman, woman, rules them still.

—ANON.

Chapter XIII

THE LION TAMER

HER name was Mrs. Lydia Pester. She was about fifty-two years old, neither tall nor short. She had a pointed chin, a pointed nose, and a pointed tongue. She was a pretentious person, with a scraggy neck and a disdainful manner. Moreover, she had a doleful expression, and on occasion she tuned her voice to match her face. She was entirely devoid of humour. Her general attitude was that of hands in the air and nose in the atmosphere. Altogether, as you by this time perceive, she was not exactly an easy person to get on with.

I first met her at the close of a Sunday evening service. Accompanied by a feeble little man, whom I afterwards knew as her husband, she waited upon me as I descended the pulpit stairs. With effusive compliments and overwhelming appreciation, she thanked me for my sermon. *What* a sermon ! Without further ado she and her husband would join the church. They had just come to reside in Poplar, and were looking for a spiritual home. She was sure they would be

happy. It was quite unnecessary that they should try any other place of worship. She would have the transfers sent from their former church at once, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The words tumbled out of her mouth, and one had the sensation of standing knee-deep in the débris of gushing sentences. By and by, she ceased talking, and there was a great calm. Taking the opportunity, I modestly expressed my gratitude for her goodwill, and, with a decorous bow, shook hands with her and—her husband, who, incidentally, had uttered not one word. With a quick movement she turned to leave me, and swept down the aisle, chin up, shoulders squared, and tightly gripping an umbrella. Her other half, with stooping figure, downcast eyes, and short steps, followed her at a run.

For some weeks I touched Mrs. Pester but lightly. I had the intuitions of a child, who, having touched fire once, hesitates to repeat the experience. Her aggressiveness made me gasp. Yet the warmth of her greeting and the intensity of her fervour rather attracted me.

However, one afternoon, I found myself standing at her door, having accepted an invitation to tea. In response to my one knock (for she and her husband lived on the ground floor) she admitted me. There was no doubt as to her pleasure at my coming, and I soon found that she

had made lavish preparations for my entertainment.

It was a cold day, and the genial warmth of the front room was welcome. Her domestic domain comprised three rooms and a scullery, which placed her among the fairly affluent of our Poplar people. The table was already laid, and the little kettle was merrily singing on the hob. She rightly surmised that I was ready for the cheering cup.

In the meanwhile I had quickly made a mental survey of the small apartment. The furniture was of the good, substantial kind, but old, and in poor condition. Numerous pictures adorned the walls. Knick-knacks were displayed upon mantel, window-sills, and brackets. In short, the room was reminiscent of better days, as though she still cherished the few articles inherited from the past.

Among the pictures were three larger than the rest. They were in gilt frames, and were placed side by side on the wall opposite the fireplace. In that position they were the most conspicuous features of the room. They were portraits of three men. At the bottom of each frame, upon a small metal plate, was painted a name, presumably of the person portrayed. From where I sat I could easily make out each name. The first—Edwin Job Smith ; the second—Gabriel Joseph Jones ; the third—Solomon David Robinson.

The preparations for tea were by this time complete.

' Now draw up to the table, Mr. Lax,' said my hospitable hostess, ' I'm sure you're dying for your tea.'

I duly, and quickly, occupied the chair pointed out to me.

' Do you take sugar—and cream ? ' queried Mrs. Pester ; ' one or two pieces ? '

' Two lumps of sugar, please, and just a little cream,' I replied.

While she poured out tea my eyes again strayed towards the portraits, and once more I silently read the names. The faces looked down on the table and appeared to be part of the company.

' I'm interested in the portraits of your three friends, Mrs. Pester. What a striking group they make ! ' said I, gazing towards the pictures.

Looking up from the teacups, she shot a quick, deprecating glance at me.

' Those are not friends,' she retorted, teapot in hand, ' they are my husbands.'

' Oh,' I exclaimed, in confusion, ' I'm sorry—I congrat—I mean, I'm surprised—I mean—— ! '

' Yes,' she continued, ignoring my confusion, ' I still think they're part of my family, and, as they have gone on, one by one, I have had a nice picture made to perpetuate their memory.'

I raised my eyebrows.

'As each husband passes on,' she explained, 'he knows that he will have his place in my heart, and on that wall.'

I raised my eyebrows again.

'You know,' she went on, still wielding the teapot, 'I have been greatly favoured by Providence in being privileged to be the helpmeet of four men. I like that word "helpmeet." It really means a trainer. A good woman should train her husband! And I have always regarded it to be my sacred duty to train my husbands—and I'm happy and proud to say that I have succeeded.' This last sentence she said in a humble, subdued voice.

There was a momentary silence. My eyebrows drooped this time.

'Did you say sugar *and* cream, Mr. Lax?' she inquired, with hesitation.

'Two lumps of sugar, please, and just a little cream.'

Having handed to me my cup, and pressed some buttered toast upon me, she continued her story.

'Perhaps you would like to hear about my three departed dears,' she suggested. 'You have such a sympathetic nature that you invite confidence.'

I inclined my head in acknowledgment of the compliment, and raised my eyebrows in encouragement of the confidence.

'I always felt sure, even as a girl, that I should marry. I was confident that Fate had love in store for me. But I *must* say that never in my wildest dreams did I expect that four husbands would lead me to the altar.'

She was moved to emotion as she counted her blessings.

'Sometimes,' she continued, 'when I am depressed, and the evil one would try to make me believe that I am a castaway, I turn and tell him that I cannot be a wicked woman, to have three husbands in heaven and one on the way ! '

A pensive expression settled on her countenance, and she gently wiped the tears from her eyes.

'I was first married thirty-three years ago. Although I say it myself, I was a pretty girl of eighteen. Of course, I had many suitors. The one I chose was Edwin Job Smith. I called him Edwin. Dear Edwin ! He was tall and fair. He was Edwin by name and Edwin by nature. We loved each other dearly. He was *so* kind, and *so* indulgent. Our brief married life was one unbroken romance. He always deferred to my judgement. Indeed, I watched him grow under my training. There were, as you would know, being a married man, occasions when little ripples broke the sweet serenity of our marital bliss. But a word from me, and all was calm again.'

She looked up at Edwin's portrait.

'Dear Edwin!' she sobbed.

'In course of time, he seemed thoroughly to enjoy doing those small acts of obedient service that come naturally to a well-trained husband. Indeed, he became patience itself! Patting him on the cheek, I used sometimes to call him Job.

'He only lived seven years after we were married. Poor dear! Like a flower, he wilted away. When he was dying, he loved me to sing to him, and he would nearly always choose:

> 'Though often here we're weary,
> There is sweet rest in heaven.'

Again there was silence for a minute or two. Again she applied her handkerchief to her saddened eyes.

'Do excuse me, Mr. Lax,' she exclaimed, as though coming back to the present hour, 'I'm so sorry, you have no tea; while I'm talking I'm forgetting you.

'Let me see, you *do* take sugar and cream?'

'Two lumps of sugar, please, and just a little cream.'

We sipped our tea once more.

'My second husband was Gabriel Joseph Jones. I called him Gabriel. He proposed to me about two months after Edwin Job died. At first I refused him. It was too soon after my first

poor dear had passed into peace and joy. But, after all, I thought, to marry the living cannot hurt the dead. So I ended my lonely widowhood in sixteen weeks.

'Now Gabriel was different from Job : yes, different in every way. He was a Welshman ! He had red hair and a fiery spirit. I soon discovered that Providence had sent me a specially difficult task.' She stopped for a minute, and her eyes had a far-away look. 'I mentioned that he had red hair. Yes, it was like a great tawny mop, and he would shake it like a lion. At first, he wouldn't do this, and he wouldn't do that ! He would be master in his own house ! So I said to myself, " Now, Lydia, it's either you or him. He needs firm handling : you must put the curb on." *And I did.* It took me a long time to get him to see that I was right. But in five years he came to ! He would clean the boots, fetch the coals, do the shopping. Indeed, he would do anything I told him to do. Yes, Gabriel was a wonderful victory of mine.

'He came to a sad end. He was found dead on the railway line. A cruel train had run over him. But, never mind, I said, he had me for thirteen years.'

At this point she looked up at the middle portrait of the three. A tear crept out of her eye. Then silence fell.

'You have had some trying experiences, Mrs. Pester,' I said, with sympathy.

'Yes, I have,' she replied. 'I made up my mind that I would never marry again. The responsibility was too great.

'But really,' she went on, with a faint smile, 'men are *so* persistent. In six months I became the wedded wife of Solomon David Robinson.

'Solomon was older than I. He had never known the joys of married life. He was an old bachelor. He had some money, and, of course, being a practical woman, I thought there was no harm in loving a man with a little money. He begged me to cheer his old heart by sharing his home. He had never known the love of a true woman. At last I promised to close his eyes at the end, and put him away in peace.

'He was ill, poor man, for many months. I made it my business to be always with him. I would read to him, talk to him, sing to him. But he suffered from dreadful headaches, and always wanted to go to sleep.

'I shall never forget how still he lay as he got near the end. His eyes were closed, and I thought he was gone. The minister came, and he brightened up a little then. "Solomon," I said, "I shall not be long after you, dear." He opened his eyes wearily, and said, "Don't hurry on my

account, please." It was just like him. He was always thinking of me.

'And so,' she said, looking at the three pictures, 'I put them all under the ground—and so they all rest together, so to speak, and comfort one another.

'As for Mr. Pester,' she resumed, 'I married him five years ago. His name is Simon. He is a good man, and obedient, but, like all men, he has his weaknesses. His training is not yet finished, but he is getting on. I shall not be satisfied until, like his namesake in the Bible, he becomes a rock. Then I shall call him Peter. My chief difficulty with Simon is to get him to stay at home. He always wants to be gadding about. But I will say this for him, he doesn't go until he has finished his household duties.'

Looking at my watch, I rose from the table. I had not noticed that the time had flown so quickly.

'I must be going,' I exclaimed.

'But you understand,' said my hostess in a final word, 'how proudly I carry my husbands on my chatelaine, and each one is a finished article !

'Now just have *one* more cup of tea, Mr. Lax,' she urged. 'Yes, of course, you *do* take sugar and cream, don't you ? '—looking up at me.

'Two lumps of sugar, please, and just a little cream.'

XIV
BITS AND PIECES

Lord, give to men who are old and rougher
The things that little children suffer,
And let keep bright and undefiled
The young years of the little child.

—MASEFIELD : *The Everlasting Mercy*.

Chapter XIV

BITS AND PIECES

I HAD seen them at the Sunday services for some weeks. It was a pleasure to observe their affectionate attitude towards one another. Evidently they were a young man and his mother. He was in the prime of his strength, she was aged and feeble. Everybody was impressed by his filial love and courtesy. They walked slowly down the aisle, she leaning heavily on his arm. He always carried a cushion to give her comfort as she sat in the pew. It was beautiful as an example to all sons and daughters.

On two or three occasions he came alone. Alas ! thought I, she is becoming too feeble to leave home. Still, it was good to see him joining devoutly and reverently in the worship.

One evening, the service over, I hastened from the pulpit to inquire how his mother might be.

' Good evening ! ' I said cordially, ' I'm glad to see you ; but I've missed your mother lately : how is she ? '

' That's not my mother,' he replied, shooting an indignant glance at me. ' That's my wife ! '

'Oh, I *am* sorry!' I cried. 'I beg your pardon! Do forgive me!' Confusion covered me.

I never saw them again.

. . . . . .

I had urged upon everybody the necessity of some sort of service. Faith without works was dead, I declared. The world was languishing for want of loving service for humanity. Let every one discover what he could do to help some other needy soul!

'I cawn't do nuthin', sir,' said my friend Jack Blount, and he stood before me a picture of dejection.

I should say that Jack had joined the Mission some months before. He was a big fellow. Handy with his fists, he could give a good account of himself in a scrap. In the former days, with a drop of liquor in him, he was something of a terror. All this was in the past. Now his spirit was willing, but his education was weak: he was no 'scholard'!

'No, sir, I cawn't do nuthin',' he repeated.

'Think it over, Jack,' I urged, 'and God will show you something you can do.'

In a few days he came to see me. His face was lit up, and his manner marked by an air of confidence.

'I've got it, sir,' he cried, waving his hands.

'Got what, Jack?' I asked.

'I've got my job,' he explained.

'Good!' I shouted. 'What is it, Jack?'

'Well, sir,' he began. 'It's like this 'ere. I notices as when ye'r preaching ahtside, yer allus starts wiv yer top-coat on. An' I notices, too, as when yer've bin goin' a bit, yer starts to sweat—an' orf comes yer top-coat.'

'Yes, Jack,' I said, 'I understand,' looking at him with curiosity.

'Nah, 'ere's where my job comes in. I've seen some o' them theer chaps wots standin' near looking at that top-coat as it lies o' th' floor—an' I knows 'em! When yer pull it orf, in future, I shall stand by, an' *Gawd 'elp anybody wot tries to pinch that top-coat.*'

. . . . . .

Mrs. Crowder was an aged widow. For some months she had suffered from eczema. With hands and arms enswathed in bandages, she was an object of pity. Besides which, poor soul, she was generally sorry for herself.

'Well, Mrs. Crowder,' I said, 'I hope you are better to-day.'

'Just middlin', sir,' she conceded. 'I'm better one day an' worse the next.'

'But you must keep cheerful, you know,' I said encouragingly.

'Ah,' she said, shaking her head, and sinking

her voice to a whisper, 'it's very serious this time.'

'Dear, dear!' I murmured, with sympathy, 'Is it like that?'

'Yus,' she replied putting her hand on the lower part of her body, and looking mysterious, '*I've got a eternal pain 'ere!*'

. . . . . .

It was baking day. Mother was mixing fruit in a cake. Having occasion to leave the room for a minute, she said to Joan, a little girl of five:

'Now, dear, Jesus is in that picture, and if you take any of mummy's fruit, He will see you!'

At that moment I walked in.

Looking full of mystery, Joan beckoned to me, and whispered:

'Please, Mr. Lax, ask Jesus to go for a little walk!'

. . . . . .

I had given an address at a children's service. The subject was the Garden of Eden. In suitable language I described the Garden, with its flowers, and trees, and fruits. I depicted Adam and Eve in the Garden, in perfect love and happiness. I told them of the one tree, the fruit of which they were not to touch. They could enjoy all the rest. Then I described how Eve tempted Adam, how they disobeyed God, and ate of the forbidden fruit. Finally, I described God driving them out of the Garden because of their disobedience.

At the close of my address, I called a little girl, Molly Bent, out of the congregation, to come on to the platform. She was a bright, imaginative child, of about seven years of age.

I was seated on a chair. Taking her on my knee, I asked if she had listened to the story I had told them, and if she would tell the other boys and girls what Adam and Eve had done.

She began at once. Seated on my knee, with perfect composure, and with all the art of the perfect actress, she began the story.

'Gawd made a garden,' she said, 'an' put a man an' a woman in it. The man was called Adam an' the woman Eve. It was such a nice garden, an', oh, *such* lovely flowers! There were big, big trees, an' the fruit 'ung on the branches. Apples an' oranges an' pears an' figs, an'—an'—an' everythin'.

'Was there a pussy there, sir?' she asked, looking up into my face.

'Yes, dear, I think there must have been a pussy,' I replied.

'Well, the pussy used to climb up the trees, an' play,' she continued.

'But there weren't no dogs, sir?' she said, with earnestness.

'Why not?' I asked.

'Because there was a serpent,' she replied mysteriously.

'Well,' she started again, 'Gawd said they could 'ave all the fruits except the apples that growed on one tree. They were big, rosy apples. An' Eve said to Adam. "Adam, are yer 'ungry?" "Yus," 'e said. "'Ow would a apple go dahn?" An' Adam said, "Orl right."

'An' Eve give Adam a apple—a nice big apple—'an 'er 'ad one 'erself!'

At this, Molly stopped for a minute. The crowd of children looked up, spellbound by her story.

Then she resumed, with uplifted hand, in a low whisper that could be heard in every part of the hall.

'Gawd was very vexed,' she said. 'E looked everywhere for Adam and Eve. But they were 'iding under a bush. An' Gawd shouted, "Adam, where are yer?"

'At last He found 'em,' she said, lowering her voice to a dramatic whisper.

'An' Gawd looked at Adam, an' Adam looked at Gawd!'

''An' Gawd said, "*Nah, Adam, 'op it!*" *An' 'e opped it!*'

. . . . . .

Mabs was about three years old. When I called, her mother told me that she had been a naughty girl. She was cross, she was disobedient, she was —well, everything she ought not to be. To crown

her offences, in a fit of temper she had thrown her dolly on the fire. After which, she tossed her little head in defiance.

At bedtime she said her prayers, winding up with the familiar, 'God bless father, God bless mother, *and make me a good girl*.'

At this point she hesitated. Then she went on. 'You know, you've not done it to-day; but perhaps you'll do better to-morrow. Anyhow, we'll see. Please do your best.'

. . . . . .

An eminent minister was once invited to address a large women's meeting in Poplar. He accepted the invitation with alacrity, and in due course stood before his great audience. He found some difficulty in finding an easy method of approach to such an unusual assembly. He did not understand them, and they did not understand him. Presently the crowd began to yawn, move about restlessly, and look at the clock.

The climax came when he said in a lugubrious voice, 'I suppose, my dear sisters, that the majority of you are absolute necessitarians! Your unfortunate circumstances almost compel you to be so.'

That was the last straw. They were indignant. As they were leaving the building some were overheard saying to one another, 'We don't

deny takin' a little drop nah and again, but we don't deserve to be called sich a name as that!'

. . . . . .

A little company of ministers were gathered over a social cup of tea. The conversation took a reminiscent turn, and all kinds of personal incidents were related. At length, one suggested that each should recount the most exasperating incident he could remember, while conducting a public meeting. My turn came. This was my story.

Some years ago, in order to meet the Secularist propaganda that was being carried on with great vigour in our district, I arranged to hold a Christian Evidence Mission. The meetings were to cover a period of ten days, and I was to speak each evening on some article of the Christian faith. At the close of my address questions were to be invited, and the last hour of the meeting was to take the form of a conference.

The meetings were largely attended. Local Secularists, augmented by others from different parts of London, came in great force.

One evening I had been speaking for nearly an hour, winding up by recapitulating my argument, and then enforcing my appeal for intellectual and moral surrender to the truth.

Several questions were asked, and duly

answered. The gathering had been an encouraging success, and I felt gratified with the result.

At the last moment a stranger got up and asked a question. An answer was given, but he was not satisfied. He began to argue, at first quietly, then with violence, declaiming against the Christian religion. We listened with attention and patience. As he proceeded he became more aggressive and frivolous.

I invited him to the platform, so that he could the better state his case. To the platform he came. Apparently without aim or object, he talked on for nearly an hour. My adjurations for brevity were not of the least avail. He leaped from one subject to another, gesticulating and perspiring profusely. The people soon tired of him, and some walked out.

Eventually, when he had been speaking for nearly an hour and a half, I got up. I could stand it no longer.

'Either talk sense or sit down!' I shouted, with heat. 'We've had enough of this.'

Turning to me with a dramatic gesture, he bellowed, '*I will neither talk sense nor sit down!*'

We were staggered.

He then started again, more vigorously than ever. Our dismay was beyond words. Consternation surged through the audience. We were all sick and tired.

I made signs to the caretaker to extinguish some of the lights. This he did. But our visitor continued as eloquently as ever in the semi-darkness.

One after another picked up his hat and left the place. By and by, only the caretaker and I were left.

Then I went home. For twenty mortal minutes the poor caretaker, seated at the back of the church, listened to the senseless harangue alone. Finally, he also stole away, and waited in the vestibule. Even then, without a single individual to listen to him, the fellow still went on.

At a quarter-past eleven he suddenly ceased. Taking his cap out of his pocket, he put it on his head, and, without a word, went out into the silent street.

To this day, we have no idea who he was, or where he came from.

. . . . . .

It was nearly midnight. I was passing St. Andrew's Hospital, the great Poor-law Institution for Poplar. There I saw a young man gazing intently through the iron gates at the huge buildings that towered high in the darkness. A smothered sob broke the silence. Looking over my shoulder, I observed him wiping his eyes with his coat-sleeve.

'Oh, Gawd!' he wailed, and walked a few steps away from me.

Touched by his distress, I turned back to speak to him.

As soon as he saw my intention, and noticed my clerical garb, he clutched my arm, and sobbed as though his heart would break.

'What's the trouble, mate?' I gently inquired.

His grief was so acute, however, that for some time he could not speak a word.

When he had gained command of himself, he loosened his hold upon my arm, and again fixed his gaze upon the hospital buildings.

'Guv'nor,' he said, 'does little kiddies ever get over peumonia?'

'Oh, yes,' I replied.

'Does they?' he eagerly questioned.

'Why?' I asked. 'Have you some one in the hospital?'

'Yus,' he groaned, 'it's my kiddie; 'er's eighteen months old, an' 'er's all I 'ave in the world.'

A fit of sobbing overcame him.

''Er mother died when 'er was born—an' I've loved 'er fer 'er mother's sake—an' the doctor's ordered 'er into the 'orspital. I've not seen 'er fer a week—an' I think sometimes as 'er's dead!'

And so he rambled on in his misery.

'Guv'nor,' he cried again, 'does kiddies get over peumonia?'

I encouraged him to be hopeful, and to be

brave. I told him that the little one was in good hands, and that the Good Shepherd was near His little lamb.

'D'ye think Jesus Christ knows abaht 'er, guv'nor?' he asked, with agony in his voice.

'I'm sure He does,' I replied. 'Don't you remember His words: "Suffer the little children to come unto Me"?'

By this time he had somewhat calmed down.

'Did you say that you hadn't seen your child for a week?' I inquired.

'No, guv'nor, I 'aven't seen 'er since 'er went in,' he replied. 'I'm at work all day, when the 'orspital's open, an' all I can do is to walk abaht 'ere all night. I can't sleep or eat, an' I'm thinkin' abaht 'er all day an' all night.

'Guv'nor,' he repeated once again, and his voice broke with the agony he was enduring, 'does little kiddies get over peumonia?'

Going to the porter's lodge, I inquired what ward the child was in—mentioning its name and telling the official of the father's distress.

'Come with me,' I said, 'and we'll inquire how your little one is getting on.'

We went along the dreary corridor, our footsteps echoing on the flagged floor. The ward was up a staircase. Treading as silently as we could, we reached the entrance. I knocked gently. A nurse opened the door.

As soon as he saw the long rows of beds in the darkened ward, he dropped on his knees.

'Oh, Gawd,' he moaned in his misery, 'save my kiddie! . . . Save my kiddie! . . . Yer took 'er mother . . . don't take my kiddie!' And his body shook with the convulsion of his grief.

I was turning to speak to him, when he fell helplessly to the floor. He had fainted.

We carried him into the nurse's room, close by.

'Poor man!' said the nurse. 'He's faint with grief, and for want of food and rest.'

Soon the doctor came, and ordered him to bed.

'Poor devil!' said he. 'He's going through it.'

XV
THE SPOILT CHRISTMAS DINNER

Glorious time of great Too-much !
Too much heat and too much noise,
Too much babblement of boys,
Too much eating, too much drinking,
Too much everything but thinking.

—Leigh Hunt.

Chapter XV

THE SPOILT CHRISTMAS DINNER

IT was Christmas Day. My wife and I, with two or three friends, had reached the Christmas-pudding stage of our festive dinner. Everything was suffused with the spirit of merriment and goodwill. Suddenly we were startled by a loud detonation from the knocker on the front door, where an insistent tattoo was kept up with vigour.

I hastened to answer that knock. On opening the door, I was surprised to see Ben Broad and his wife, with five little Broads, standing before me. Clearly something was wrong. Ben's face was dark with anger. Mrs. Broad's countenance was tearful and terror-stricken. The children, poor things, all looked as though they had lost something. Whatever could be the matter?

'A Merry Christm——!' I was just beginning the familiar greeting.

''Ere, what d'yer think o' this, Mr. Lax?' cried Ben in a loud voice. 'It's the Christmas Club goose,' he went on to explain, at the same time flinging at me a bulky parcel.

I ought to explain that my friend, Ben Broad, was a labourer in the Docks. He was big and

brawny, and carried himself with a certain elephantine heftiness, due, no doubt, to his having carried heavy loads for the greater part of his life. Alas ! Ben had loved his cups, and had the reputation of being a dissolute character. But he got converted. That made all the difference in the world. He was literally transformed. One evidence of his changed life was a certain frugality and thriftiness to which he was formerly a stranger. One symptom of the new spirit was his becoming a member of our ' Help Yourself ' Christmas Club at the Mission. He had paid one shilling a week for some months, and had become entitled to a fat goose and other seasonable Christmas fare. Three nights before December 25 he had proudly and ostentatiously carried home his Christmas spoil, including the big fat goose, the first he had ever bought.

' What d'yer think abaht it ? ' he repeated in challenging tones. ' It's bad ; it's rotten ! '

' It's bitter,' chimed in Mrs. Broad.

' We couldn't eat it,' echoed the children.

' Oh,' I replied, considerably nonplussed, ' I'm very sorry, Ben. Come in, and let us have a look at it.'

The whole family trooped into the house, almost crowding the small study. They stood, a dishevelled and dejected group, awaiting the result of the examination.

I opened the parcel. What a mess! Ben was evidently not an expert carver. The poor goose was simply a mangled, discoloured wreck.

I picked out a morsel, and tasted it. Ugh! It was vile! Making a wry face, I hastily ejected it from my mouth, and quickly wiped my lips with my handkerchief. I had never encountered such villainous stuff. That goose was in a very bad way!

'Did you clean the goose, Mrs. Broad?' I blandly inquired.

'O' course I did,' she replied with asperity.

'How did you clean it?' I further inquired.

'Why, I 'eld it under the tap, and wiped it with a rag. 'Ow else should I clean it?' she snapped, with a toss of her head.

'But what about the internals, Mrs. Broad?' I gently suggested.

'Internals? Wot's internals?' she asked.

'Why, you know, of course, don't you, Mrs. Broad?' I sweetly explained, 'that you remove the internal organs of the goose to make way for the stuffing?'

'Stuffin'?' she ejaculated, 'wot's stuffin'?'

'Well,' I went on, 'stuffing is the sage and onions and breadcrumbs that you fill it with, that gives it such a lovely flavour. Then, with apple-sauce, you know, roast goose is a feast for the gods!'

' Garn,' she cried, with contempt, ' 'as all that to be done ? Why don't Gawd A'mighty make a goose that don't need no stuffin' ? '

Before I could reply to this outburst, Ben butted in. I had been watching him. He was licking his dry lips. The thought of roast goose, with stuffing and apple-sauce, had set his salivary glands in action. He had been hurt at a man's tenderest spot—his stomach—and felt very sorry for himself. His heightening colour and dilated eye boded ill for the domestic peace.

' Hav' I missed all that ? ' he wailed, with a look of unutterable bitterness.

He put his hands on his wife's shoulders.

' Maria,' he shouted, ' if I weren't converted, I'd giv' yer a clout on the side of yer 'ead ! '

' No, no, Ben,' I said, ' you mustn't talk like that ; she'll know better next time ; you'll have a glorious dinner next Christmas.'

' Next Christmas ! ' he shouted, with exasperation ; ' but what abaht my dinner to-day ? '

That was a poser. But I had an inspiration.

' Why, Ben,' I suggested, ' come with me to Furze, the butcher, and we'll see what he's got.'

Putting on my hat, I led the procession out of the study into the road. In three minutes we were at the butcher's shop. A loud knock on the door soon brought the astonished butcher.

'A merry Christmas, Mr. Furze!' I said. 'Have you anything to eat left in your place?'

'Only sausages, Mr. Lax,' he replied, looking round the empty shop.

'Splendid!' I cried. 'Please let me have three pounds of sausages—and stick a bit of holly in with them.'

The savoury dainties were soon weighed, and put into paper.

'There you are, Ben,' I said gaily, 'you'll get your dinner after all! Go and have a good feed—and a merry Christmas to you all!'

'Gawd bless yer, Mr. Lax,' he exclaimed, with enthusiasm; and grasping my hand with a giant's squeeze, he said, 'Yer a dear old cock, sir!'

'Good-bye, children!' I shouted, as they moved off, 'and a merry Christmas to you all!'

'Please sir,' said a little girl, running back, 'does we have to clean the sausengers too?'

XVI
THE BOY IN THE STREET

And he who gives a child a treat
Makes joy-bells ring in Heaven's street,
And he who gives a child a home
Builds palaces in Kingdom come.

—MASEFIELD : *The Everlasting Mercy*.

Chapter XVI

THE BOY IN THE STREET

'WHATEVER shall I do wi' this 'ere boy o' mine?' said Mrs. Robbins tearfully. 'E's got in wi' a rough gang, an' I can do nothin' wi' 'im!' As evidence of her perplexity she showed me two broken window-panes, a smashed lock in a drawer from which his mother's hard-earned savings had been stolen, and, worst of all, a black eye, which he had given her as proof positive that he was able to look after himself! Teddy Robbins was fourteen years of age. His father was dead. He was the eldest of three children. His mother had worked hard to bring up her family, and had fondly hoped that Teddy would one day help her to bear the burden. While he was a child, her tender solicitude and care were sufficient to control him, but when he left the Council school he adopted the usual attitude of such youths, and refused to accept parental authority. Hence his poor mother's heartache.

I knew Teddy well. He was not essentially a bad boy. When he was alone you could influence him in the right direction, but when he became

part of the gang of young hooligans he was insolent, daring, unmanageable. He had arrived at the age when the herd instinct was predominant. For awhile it looked as though that instinct would produce the criminal that was hidden in his nature.

I had first come into close touch with Teddy after an incident that took place one Sunday afternoon. He had been induced to come to Sunday school, but was always in trouble through breaches of discipline. Freaks of temper, for no accountable reason, would lead him to destroy property, perform acts of cruelty on younger children, and address impertinent remarks to those in charge of the school. Finally, with an air of bravado, he would stalk out into the street. He always returned to the school after a time. How to deal with him was a perplexity. Teddy was a problem.

On this particular afternoon the school had been dismissed. It was winter, and nearly dark. As punishment for some mischievous prank, he was told to remain behind until the other scholars had left. He sullenly obeyed. Eventually, permission to leave was given. Jumping from his seat, he ran out of the school. In less than a minute he returned like a whirlwind, carrying a long piece of timber which he had picked up in the street. Without a word he ran round the

school, and, with the weapon he carried, smashed every electric light standard and bracket in the place, reducing everything to darkness and to ruin.

The superintendent was filled with indignation and dismay. As soon as he had recovered his breath he came to see me, and, in vivid detail, recounted the unhappy episode. He demanded that Ted should be expelled from the school, and that he should be made to pay for the damage he had done.

I advised patience, and, on the following day, went to see the boy's mother. He himself was not at home. Mrs. Robbins was heart-broken, for he had not been home since the scene in the school. She was full of apprehension and fear. Where he had spent the night she had no idea.

Two days later I met him in the street.

'Hello! Ted,' I said. 'What's happened to you?'

'Nuthin', sir,' was the reply.

'Where did you sleep on Sunday night?' I inquired.

'With Bill Slades,' he replied.

Bill Slades was a lad of sixteen who lived in lodgings. He was Ted's evil genius.

'Well, Ted,' I went on, 'what about Sunday afternoon?'

'I was a fool, sir,' was the quick reply.

' I should think you were,' I agreed. ' What made you do it ? '

' Dunno, sir.'

Putting my arm through his, and walking quietly on, I said, ' What do you expect me to do, Ted ? '

' Giv' me a good kickin', sir,' he replied. ' Do it nah ! ' he went on. Suiting the action to the word, he suddenly turned round, submitting to me that part of his anatomy specially provided by nature for corporeal chastisement !

' Look here, Ted,' I said, ' this wants talking over. Come along ; let us have a walk ! '

For over an hour we walked and talked. At first he was sullen and silent. It was difficult to read his mind. One could not decide as to whether he was sorry for the damage he had done, or whether the spirit of bravado would carry the day. He was non-committal in his attitude. Still, one felt that something within him was struggling for expression, although little satisfaction could be gleaned at the time. So we parted.

On the following evening he came to see me. Reason had prevailed. He confessed his sorrow for the pain and loss he had caused, and volunteered to go at once and apologize to the superintendent. I knew that something big had happened. My heart overflowed with joy.

That was the beginning of great things in the life of Ted Robbins. The crisis came a few months afterwards. With extraordinary decisiveness he declared himself a follower of Christ. Development was slow. He had much to learn and to unlearn. God led him along strange paths, but the future proved that ' there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will.'

For years he carried a secret purpose in his heart. Attending evening classes, he equipped himself in all kinds of mechanical ways. He worked with prodigious energy. By the time he was twenty-six years of age his mother had passed away. She was worn out with the struggle of life. Ted was her one consolation and joy.

Some weeks after the funeral he came to see me. In that interview was laid bare the deep secret of his heart and the one consuming passion for which he lived. He had settled his mother's affairs. His two sisters were now able to look after themselves. He was therefore free to go to Central Africa as a missionary.

' But, Ted,' I said in astonishment, ' how will you get there ? Under what society will you go out ? Who will maintain you ? ' And many other questions I put to him.

' I shall go out on my own,' he quietly replied. ' I have been saving every penny I could, and my reason for attending the evening classes was to

learn all I could about woodwork, house-building, agriculture, and poultry-keeping.'

I listened and gasped. Here was a lad who for years, unknown to his dearest friends, had cherished the call of God to work in Africa, and had patiently laboured to equip himself for his high calling. With the passing of his mother the last tie to London and to England was severed. He was now gloriously free to follow Christ in Central Africa ! His face was radiant and his whole spirit vibrant with emotion.

Before long he sailed to the East Coast of Africa. Then he tramped hundred of miles to the spot where he felt God wished him to be. There he fixed his tent, and there he has remained. He has taken upon himself the burden of Ethiopia, has identified himself with the lowest and the least, and, with no help from outside, lives for, and with, and in, the hearts of the natives whom he has chosen.

. . . . . .

The foregoing story of Teddy Robbins is typical of many that could be told. So far as the earlier period of his life is concerned, every city, town, and village could point to similar instances of the problem of the boy in the street confronting those who are anxiously working for the future of the country and the race.

But the problem reaches its acutest stage in our

great cities. If for no other reason, the great numbers of adolescent boys and youths constitute a portent and a menace. It is estimated that in London alone there are more than 100,000 of these boys and youths drifting every night during their leisure hours. Inevitably they make the street their school and their playground. Much of what they learnt in their school-days is forgotten, and then another kind of education is begun.

When we remember the environment in which so many of our working boys have to live, and the demoralizing effect of unemployment on their young minds, it makes us realize the supreme importance of some sound, practical, wholesome counteracting influence.

It is just as well that we look into some of the causes of present troubles.

We must recognize that the age between fourteen and eighteen is the dangerous age. Even in the home where every safeguard is provided, and where an intelligent appreciation of the difficulties of adolescence is shown, we are only too familiar with the perils that face the young. But when you get into the region of poorer folk, where the home life is cramped and narrow, and where conditions forbid any of the amenities of culture and refinement, the difficulties are vastly increased.

A youth in whom I was interested fell ill. He was stricken with pneumonia. On one of my

visits I inquired of the boy's mother how he had picked up such a terrible cold. The poor woman replied that in the two rooms where she and her husband and the five children lived there was no room for the two elder boys, and that they had to spend their evenings in the streets to make room for the younger ones ! It was because of this exposure to bitter weather, together with scanty clothing, that the boy contracted the illness which unfortunately ended in his death.

Another reason is unemployment. Of all the tragedies in our national life, surely none could be more appalling than this ! At the age when body, mind, and soul are at the formative stage, it is nothing less than a calamity that the conditions into which these young people are thrown should be so conducive to neglect and wrongdoing.

Then there is also the herd instinct, that has its most dangerous expression in the life of the city. The worst features of character are stressed, and the most daring and unscrupulous of the gang naturally becomes leader. In course of time he stamps his type upon the rest.

Never before in living memory has the need of sane, wholesome, saving work been so urgent. The after-effects of the war are so dire in their incidence on the youth of the land that the next generation may involve us in difficulties greater than any we have known in our long history.

To achieve good results our ideals in regard to the adolescent boy should be fourfold :

Recreative. We have first to bring colour and movement into their lives. To such boys their environment is frequently grim and drab. Their day's work is almost invariably soul-destroying. At the best it is merely mechanical. Provision must be made for games. Their lungs and limbs are crying out for expansion and expression. We must not be afraid of noise. At that stage and age, quiet decorous youth is almost unnatural.

Educational. We must help the boy up the ladder of ambition. We must point out to him some worthy goal. By personal contact we must get to know his mind, and then suggest the kind of career in which he would be likely to excel. At this period the average boy is groping blindly in the dark. He does not know what to do. That is why so many drift into blind-alley occupations. To this end we should encourage him to cultivate his mind, guide him in his reading, widen his horizons. So will he develop his brain and improve his chances in life.

Character-forming. It is at this juncture in his evolution that he needs to be taught self-government. Nothing is of greater importance than that. He should aim at self-mastery. The modern doctrine of self-determination and self-expression sometimes leads to degeneration of

ideals and absolute selfishness. There needs to be taught the wholesome doctrine of self-suppression as well as self-expression. By working with and for the team he will grow to realize his responsibility for good work and for well-being in relation to others. From that he will reach the stage when he will be able to stand upon his own feet, to work for himself, and, with a good conscience, play the game of life. This will best be taught in the company of others.

Spiritual. The final altitude to which the boy will grow will be that in which the sanctions of religion will be the determining factor in his development. When I speak of religion, I do not for the moment confine myself to the narrow interpretation of the word—that is, religion in its denominational sphere. I mean his general attitude to God and the universe, his relation to his fellows, his responsibility for his part in the world's work.

When that sure foundation has been laid, we can proceed to the more personal aspect of religion, and speak to him of the joy and strength and fortitude that belief in God and the service of Christ produce. To lead him to personal dedication of his life to such worship and service will inevitably culminate in sacrifice for and identification with, his fellows.

XVII
THRILLS AND FRILLS

In vasty dusk of life abroad,
They fondly thought to err from God,
Nor knew the circle that they trod.

—Francis Thompson : *A Judgement in Heaven.*

Chapter XVII

THRILLS AND FRILLS

TOMMY BINKS had been run over by a motor-car. His injuries were serious. He was taken to Poplar Hospital, and for some days his life was despaired of. Gradually he improved.

Of course, I called to see the patient. He was swathed in bandages. His left eye was the only presentable part of his face, the remainder being hidden beneath plasters and surgical rags.

I expressed my sympathy, and wished him a speedy recovery.

'Cheerio, sir!' said Tommy, with a faint smile. 'It's 'ard luck; yer cawnt get baccy after eight o'clock, and yer cawnt get beer after ten, but yer can bally well get run over any hour o' the day!'

I agreed. It was hard luck.

. . . . . .

I was chairman of a committee concerning Child Welfare. A well-known firm in Poplar wanted a smart boy, and the committee was asked

to select a suitable lad. There were three candidates. One was particularly bright.

We wished to test his powers of observation. So we turned a picture with its face to the wall, and placed the waste-paper basket on its side, with some of its contents strewn on the floor.

The boy was shown into the room.

'What is your name, my boy ?' I asked.

'William Ewart Vernon, sir,' he replied briskly.

'What do they call you at home ?' I inquired.

'Billy, sir,' came the reply.

'Well, now, Billy, would you like this job ?' said I.

'Yessir,' he answered.

'What standard have you passed ?' I queried.

'Seventh, sir,' he replied triumphantly.

'Good !' I ejaculated.

'Have you good eyesight, Billy ?' I asked.

'Yessir,' was the answer.

'Do you notice anything peculiar about this room ?'

'Yessir,' he answered, as he looked round, 'that picture's wrong. Shall I put it straight ?' Suiting the action to the word, he put the picture right.

'Anything else ?' I went on.

'Yessir,' he cried. 'Somebody's knocked the waste-paper basket over ; 'e wants 'is ear cloutin' !' And he put the basket right end up.

The committee was much impressed, and I thought I would draw him a little further. I placed a pen behind my ear.

'Now my boy,' said I, 'that's very creditable: you evidently keep your eyes open.'

With a smile I pursued my questionnaire.

'Do you observe anything peculiar about myself?'

'Yessir,' he promptly replied.

'What is it?'

'Yer wants yer 'air cuttin', sir!'

He got the job.

. . . . . .

It was a case of domestic infelicity. I was asked to advise in difficult circumstances, with a view to inducing the young couple to live together in harmony again.

I made my appeal to the husband.

'Why don't you make a fresh start?' I argued. 'Think of the glorious days when you were courting! Remember how you treated her then—why not do the same now? If you will, you can bring back again the same experiences. Now go home and treat her as you did before you were married.'

''E giv' me two black eyes when we was courtin'!' said the wife.

'Oh!——'

. . . . . .

The congregation was waiting for the Sunday evening service to commence. I duly entered the pulpit, and announced the opening hymn :

' Shall we unite in singing hymn No. 286 ? '

A voice from the gallery : ' Go ahead, guv'nor ; I've no objection ! '

The service proceeded.

. . . . . .

It was a wedding. The bridegroom hung about the door, waiting for the bride.

I invited him into the vestry, in order to make the necessary inquiries for entry into the register.

' What is the bride's correct name ? ' I inquired.

' Name ? ' he murmured, with a puzzled look.

' Yes,' I replied, ' her full name.'

' I dunno,' he said. ' I allus calls 'er Kid.'

' But what is her Christian name ? ' I pursued.

' I dunno,' he repeated, with a shake of his head. ' I allus calls 'er Kid.'

' But surely you know your bride's Christian name,' I said, with astonishment.

' I dunno,' he said again. ' I never axed 'er.'

' Well, then, what is her surname, for I see it is spelt in two ways in the certificates ? '

' Surname ? ' he asked. ' What's that ? '

' Her second name,' I explained.

' I dunno ! ' he repeated blankly.

I got it ultimately from the bride herself.

. . . . . .

A drama in an eel-pie shop. I was walking, one winter's night, along East India Dock road. Sleet fell in cutting blasts. The road was like a quagmire. Crowds of shivering folk hurried to and fro on their business.

In the distance I saw the brilliant lights of the eel-pie shop illuminating the pavement in front. The high wind brought the savoury odour of hot pies to my nostrils. How delicious !

Two thin, ragged urchins stood looking through the open door. They looked hungry as they shivered with the cold. Hands in pockets, with bare heads and bare knees, they seemed transfixed before the tempting savouries. A customer left the shop.

Suddenly the scene was changed. The young urchins rushed into the shop, flung on to the floor the two girls serving behind the counter. Picking up a tray of eel-pies, they ran helter-skelter into the road. One of the girls, regaining her feet stood on the doorstep screaming. Passers-by looked on languidly. The young adventurers bolted down a side-street with their prize.

And the traffic flowed on as usual.

. . . . . .

Alec Cryer was a Poplar boy. His father died early, leaving him and his two sisters to be brought up by their mother. The story of the family was one of increasing struggle. Mrs. Cryer was a

brave woman. Her sacrifices for her children were of the epic order. She wore herself out in providing for them. She was a heroine indeed.

Now, as Alec grew up there was a considerable strain of the rebel in him. He had no adolescence. He was thrust into manhood whilst yet a boy, for he had to help to maintain the home as soon as he left school. He was then fourteen years old. He went from one job to another, each change meaning a shilling or so extra in wages, for every penny counted.

At seventeen he drifted into an engineering factory. There he found his true vocation. He revelled in his work, and applied himself so vigorously to his task that before long he had mastered the principles involved in turning out the special products of the factory.

With the years there developed between his mother and himself an extraordinary attachment. He did his utmost to discharge his debt of obligation to her who had borne such burdens for him.

At twenty-four he started in business on his own account. His savings, together with the help of friends, provided the modest capital necessary to purchase machinery for his new factory. Energy and industry brought success. Consequently, easier times came to the family. The clouds had lifted.

After two or three years he patented a machine that added efficiency to his plant and greatly increased the output of the particular commodity he made. It was a wonderful achievement, and revolutionized his business.

He then began to think of marriage, and told me of his hopes and aspirations. He was going to propose to a certain girl. What did I think of his chances of winning her ? If he succeeded, would I marry them ? He was full of schemes and high purposes.

His prospects were brilliant.

Moreover, a change came over himself. His dour, rebellious attitude to life gave place to a warm, genial acceptance of the daily round.

One evening he went to his factory. The workers had gone home. He had the place to himself. He loved to overhaul machinery when he was alone—touching this and adjusting that. Especially did he enjoy making improvements to his own inventions.

The next morning he was found dead. He had inadvertently put the machine—the creation of his own brain—into motion—and it had crushed the life out of him !

Alas ! for the ironies of life !

. . . . . .

A thousand Poplar women, with three or four hundred babies, and (incidentally) a few husbands,

were enjoying their one glorious day at the seaside. The following riddle of the sands was duly noted :

Little boy (crying loudly) : ' I want a ride on a donkey ! I want a ride on a donkey ! '

Distracted mother : ' 'Ere, daddy, git dahn, an' giv 'im a ride on *your* back ! '

. . . . . .

Dan Jefferies possessed the glorious gift of a sunny nature. Providence had lavished upon him the blessed alchemy by which he changed ugliness into beauty, darkness into light, sorrow into joy. He was the embodiment of the grace of kindness.

He had been converted some years, and had developed wonderfully in mind and soul. Even in the old days his sunny nature had made him popular. Publicans were glad to give him free beer in order to get him into their bar parlours. He was the joyful centre of any company.

His conversion quickened and deepened his natural gift of joy. From some secret spring the blessed stream flowed and bubbled over. He was a great asset to the Mission.

One day he came to see me. He had a proposal to make.

' The Lord's given me a new job, sir ! ' said he, with a laugh.

' Oh,' I replied, ' What's that Dan ? '

'Why,' he continued. 'As I looks round the congregation, so many o' the people seem miserable: I know they're havin' a hard fight; so if you don't mind, sir, I'd like to stand in the door-way as they come in and offer 'em a welcome.'

'All right, Dan,' I replied, 'I agree, and we'll call you the Door Steward.'

'Oh, no,' he replied, with eagerness, 'that'll spoil it; call me the Cheer-up Gentleman!'

'A splendid idea,' I cried. I saw at once what a great service he could render to the Mission, and to the people.

So Dan was duly installed as 'The Cheer-up Gentleman!'

To our own people who knew him, he radiated goodwill and kindliness. To strangers, he imparted homeliness and geniality. A warm welcome and a hearty handshake as they entered, then passing them on to sidesmen in the aisles, they caught the happy contagion of Dan's gentle and genial nature.

How often has a note come to me in the vestry: 'Please pray for ——, he has lost a child'; or 'Kindly remember ——, he is out of work'; or 'So-and-so's ship is overdue, and his wife is anxious.' So the pulpit and the pew were kept in perfect touch and sympathy.

Alas! Dan's blessed ministry came to an

untimely end. An accident suddenly and tragically translated him to higher service. I think that God must have watched Dan's joyous discharge of life's duties, and thought that such a spirit and such devotion would be useful up in heaven. Anyhow, wherever Dan Jefferies is, I am sure that he is still ' The Cheer-up Gentleman.'

XVIII
HAS THE CHURCH A FUTURE ?

'. . . but the good Lord Jesus
has had his day.'
Had? has it come? It has only dawned.
It will come by and by.
O how could I serve in the wards if the
Hope of the World were a lie?

—TENNYSON: *Children's Hospital.*

Chapter XVIII

HAS THE CHURCH A FUTURE?

HAS the Church a future? It has had a great past. It has a present. Has it a future? The answer is: It depends entirely upon the Church. Let us make no mistake. The Church is not sacrosanct. It is not managed by magic. It is not fool-proof. If it does not justify itself, it will cease to be. It is like a house of business in, at least, this one respect—that it must deliver the goods it is intended to distribute. If a business house fails in this vital function, we know what happens. Bankruptcy and closure follow. The Church stands on the roadway of life. Its particular products are always associated with its Founder and Head. The passer-by knows what to expect, and looks for those moral and spiritual products. If they are not forthcoming, he turns away, and the Church probably sees him no more.

But what is the Church? When we speak of the Church, we mean that great body of individuals who are saved, inspired, sustained, controlled by Jesus Christ. In the last resort, every member of the Church is a witness to the life and power of Jesus.

When Christ founded the Church he took extraordinary risks. He committed His great scheme to a handful of men and women. He made no provision for its perpetuation in case they failed. He staked everything upon them. He simply said, ' Go ye into all the world and preach the good news '—and they went. Wonderful to relate, in spite of folly, and fatuity, and failure, the great body of Christians have proved faithful. Throughout the centuries, these average, ordinary men and women, like ourselves, have kept the fire burning. Inside the Church there is still the vital flame, the directing force, the consuming love.

In thinking of the future of the Church, there are certain features in human nature to encourage us. For instance, man is incurably religious. He must have religion. All the world, and the whole range of history, bear testimony to this. Religion is indispensable, in one form or another. Plutarch was profoundly right when he said, ' Cities have been found without walls, without schools, without markets, without theatres, but a city without a temple no man ever saw.'

And the reason is clear. Men are intelligent creatures. When they see the harvest follow springtime ; when they watch natural forces producing increase in their flocks and herds ; when they feel in themselves the inward urge

that brings youths and maidens together in marriage, and then behold the miracle of reproduction of their own species in the world ; when they see order, and harmony, and sequence in the universe about them—they cannot but feel that they are in the presence of a wonderful power, a power greater than themselves, upon whom they are dependent every moment of their lives. From one process of reasoning they proceed to another, until they must invest that wonderful power with personality. That Personality they ultimately call God, whom they must somehow learn to know, and then to obey.

And we go further. As we get to understand that Power, we grow to see that it is not a cruel and vindictive Personality. We discover, from its various manifestations, that it is good. ' God is love.' As Matthew Arnold said, ' It is a Power not ourselves that makes for righteousness.' The mighty appeal of that Power finds a response in our intellect and in our soul. Then we find how insatiable is our thirst for knowledge of that Power. Hence arises men's need of religion.

And so our search becomes more and more reverent. In the presence of that Power we become conscious of a sacred awe. We cannot be flippant or aggressive in our approach to God. Humility and simplicity best become the seeker

after truth. Here I am reminded of the story of the child.

A little girl was discovered by her mother with a pencil and piece of paper.

'What are you doing ?' asked the mother.

'I am drawing God,' replied the child.

'But you cannot do that,' said the mother. 'Nobody has seen God, and nobody knows what He is like.'

'They'll know now,' said the little one.

To this point we have been moving in the realm of theory. It is a region preliminary to any discovery of truth. But we now arrive at that juncture where practical considerations are decisive. There are certain conditions necessary in the representation of that good, and righteous, and loving Power before it can be universally accepted. In other words, the Church must conform to that moral environment which will make it attractive in the world.

It must be the Church of the People. How tragic that this should need emphasis ! Nothing is gained by shutting our eyes to the fact that millions think that the Church is not meant for them—that it exists for another order of beings altogether. In spite of churches in abundance, both in town and country (I now speak of England), in spite of millions bearing the name of Christ (again I speak of England), there

is a persistent conviction in the minds of multitudes that they are not wanted in the Church. Of course, I know that it is a mistaken idea of the situation, but I am bound to admit that I believe it exists.

One day I chanced upon a poor fellow who was very ill with tuberculosis. It quickly became clear to me that he was dying. His age was about thirty-five years. He was in bed, with scarcely a rag to cover him. The room was a hovel, and entirely devoid of comforts. Filth sent out abominable smells. His wife had gone out to earn a few shillings, and so he was alone.

Knocking at the door, I walked in. As soon as he saw that I was a minister he became livid with rage. Rising painfully upon his elbow, he faced me. He was inarticulate with hate. His eyes grew large, and, although his mouth opened, for awhile he could make no sound.

At last he shrieked, 'Get aht of it!' Still gazing in my direction, and gesticulating violently, he repeated, 'Get aht of it! Don't ye 'ear?'

'Go steady, mate,' I said. 'You've made a mistake this time: you're talking to a friend.'

He had now fallen back on to the bed, with exhaustion, but, although unable to utter a word, he pointed towards the door, mutely ordering me out.

I talked to him gently, urging him to be quiet,

as he was doing himself injury by such a passionate outburst.

But at intervals, as his breath returned, he cursed the Church, and execrated everybody connected with it.

' Wot d'yer care fer us ? ' he cried. ' Fer us,' he continued, ' who can't giv' yer money ? Yer Jesus wouldn't 'ave done that.'

His choking cough stopped him.

' Yer don't care . . . a damn ! ' he hissed.

So he went on. He was beside himself with passion. Then again his cough shook his poor, emaciated frame.

I held him in my arms, wiping the beads of perspiration that rolled down his face. He looked up at me, and his eyes flashed the hate he could not speak. A dreadful obsession had taken hold upon him.

My heart ached for the poor fellow. Blood was trickling from his mouth. With my handkerchief I wiped his lips, and did all I could to give him ease.

Minutes passed on. Never shall I forget that slow, trickling stream of frothy blood ! But, even with that handicap, he spoke in gasps, railing against the followers of Jesus—who didn't do as He did !

Again I urged him to rest, and did everything I could to pacify and comfort him.

'No!' he gurgled once more, 'yer don't care . . . a damn! . . . a damn!'

His voice had sunk to a whisper. Then he became quiet. Slowly he grew limp, and his head fell to my shoulder. Soon the tense body had relaxed. And I knew that I was alone with a dead man.

I was too late to convince him that the Church did want him.

Again I repeat it. I believe that a fatal misapprehension has taken hold of multitudes. It is our business to prove to them that they are mistaken, that the followers of Jesus, like their Master Himself, *do* want them, and that they will not be happy until all have joined the family circle of God.

Now, this will not be easy work. Words will not do it. It will mean sacrifice—long-continued, patient, unremitting. It will mean real brotherhood—no question of class distinction, wealth, or prejudice must come in. It will mean love—consuming, pitying, saving. Nothing will produce the spirit necessary in the Church but that which our fathers called 'the dying love of Jesus.'

Then it must be *a Church of Transformed Characters*. Life must correspond with profession. The first demand of the doubter in regard to religion is sincerity. If that is absent, it becomes invertebrate and useless. This test applies to no

other form of faith or life as it does to religion. A mathematician may teach sound mathematics and yet be an immoral man. An artist may paint a beautiful picture and be possessed of an ugly moral nature. But not so in religion. Christ's representative must have the spirit of Christ. The followers of the highest must needs have the upward look. Nothing can take the place of consecrated character.

Finally, it must be *the Church of Christ*. It must exist by His mandate, proclaim His ' good news,' manifest His spirit, submit to His authority. In it Christ must be ' all and in all.'

It is here where the Person of Christ becomes the greatest asset of His Church. Unlike the little girl many are uncertain as to what God is like, and are not clear in their delineation of the nature of God. But we do know Jesus. And we know that He is God. He comes nearer to us because He once ' took our flesh and dwelt among us.' Whatever we know about God we have learnt through Jesus. And it is here where we are on safe ground in thinking and acting for His Church. The world believes Him to be the highest and best of the race. The Carpenter of Nazareth is the ideal of the worker, the Shepherd of the sheep is the pattern of the lover of his kind, the Friend Divine never lets us down. Here, I repeat, we are on safe ground.

We have heard of a wide estuary of the sea on the Scottish coast. It is two miles across. To reach one side of the estuary from the other involved a long journey round by land. For many years that watery gulf divided populations and created perpetual difficulties. Engineers pronounced a bridge to cross the estuary an impossible hope.

At length an engineer arose who declared that it could be done. The work of building the bridge was committed to him. He made the island in the middle of the estuary the pivot of his scheme. From that centre he threw out an arm to the north and another to the south. The estuary was spanned, and the great Forth Bridge united the two shores.

That is what Christ did. For ages the greatest and wisest of men could see no way of bridging the yawning gulf of human sin and folly. At last Christ came. Standing in the midst of the gulf, He reached out one hand to the Father, and the other to man. He bridged the gulf, and by Him we go to the Father.

To carry on that great work is the responsibility of the Church. There is no other way of bringing men to God than through the Christ of the Cross.

This is where we become conscious of the infinite love of Christ. In that love is our only hope. And men know it. In the last resort they

are convinced that none but Christ is equal to the task of leading them to those moral altitudes they feel to be their destiny.

If the Church, in the spirit of her Master and Lord, will only go out ' to seek and to save that which is lost,' and, standing in the midst of the people, boldly declare ' This is the way ; walk ye in it ! ' she will survive, and will see the day when ' the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.'

One day I saw a poor wretch reeling along the street. He had been a member of the Mission Church, but, alas ! had fallen away. As soon as he saw me he staggered across the road, calling me by name.

' I know what you'll say, sir ! ' he cried. ' You'll say that Gawd will send me to hell for gettin' drunk ! But 'E won't !—at least, Jesus won't ! 'E knows 'ow the devil's in me, and 'ow I've 'ad my whack of hell down 'ere ! An' Jesus, 'E's a gentleman, 'E is ! '

Yes, he was right. Jesus knows, and Jesus cares, and, best of all, Jesus loves and saves !

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